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Pandora

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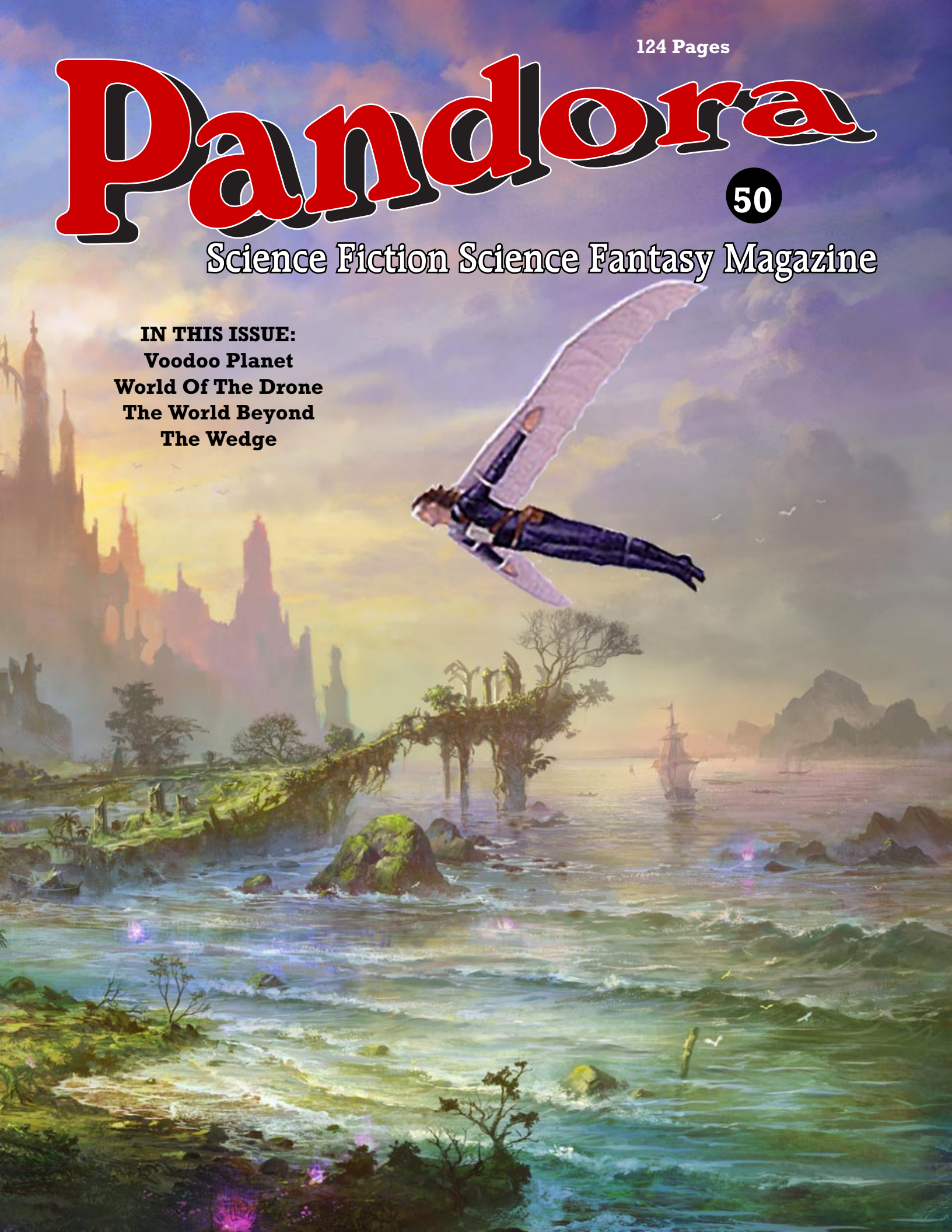
Science Fiction Science Fantasy Magazine



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VOODOO PLANET

CHALLENGE ME WITH MONSTERS!

"From between the two shuffling dancers padded something on four feet. The canine-feline creature was more than just a head; it was a loose-limbed, graceful body fully eight feet in length, and the red eyes in the prick-eared head were those of a killer.... Words issued from between those curved fangs, words which Dane might not understand....

"Dane slid his blade out surreptitiously, setting its point against the palm of his hand and jabbing painfully; but the terrible creature continued to advance.... There was no blurring of its lines...."

Dane Thorson of the space-ship Solar Queen knew there was only one way to win out over this hideous thing—a battle to the end between his rational mind and the hypnotic witchcraft of Lumbrilo, the mental wizard of the planet Khatka.

1

Talk of heat—or better not—on Xecho. This water-logged world combined all the most unattractive features of a steam bath and one could only dream of coolness, greenness—more land than a stingy string of islands.

The young man on the promontory above the crash of the waves wore the winged cap of a spaceman with the insignia of a cargo-master and not much else, save a pair of very short shorts. He wiped one hand absently across his bare chest and brought it away damp as he studied, through protective sun goggles, the treacherous promise of the bright sea. One could swim—if he wanted to lose most of his skin. There were minute organisms in that liquid that smacked their lips—if they had lips—every time they thought of a Terran.

Dane Thorson licked his own lips, tasting salt, and plodded back through the sand of the spaceport to the berth of the Solar Queen. This had been a long day, and one with more snarl-ups than he cared to count, keeping him on a constant, dogged trot between the ship and the fitting yard where riggers labored with the slowest motions possible to the human body—or so it seemed to the exasperated acting-Cargo-Master of the Free Trader. Captain Jellico had long ago taken refuge in his cabin to preserve the remnants of his temper. Dane

had been allowed no such escape.

The Queen had a schedule for refitting to serve as a mail ship, and that time allowance did not allow for humidity playing the devil with the innards of robot fitters. She had to be ready to lift when the Combine ship now plying that run set down and formally signed off in her favor. Luckily, most of the work was done and Dane had given a last searching inspection before signing the rigger's book and reporting to his captain.

The air-conditioned interior of the Queen comforted him as he climbed to his quarters. Ship air was flat, chemically pure but unappetizing stuff. Today it was a relief to breathe. Dane went on to the bather. At least there was no lack of water—with the local skinners filtered out. It was chill but relaxing on his gaunt young body.

He was sealing on his lightest tunic when the ramp buzzer sounded. A visitor—oh, not the supervisor-rigger again! Dane went to answer with dragging feet. For the crew of the Queen at the moment numbered exactly four, with himself for general errand boy. Captain Jellico was in his quarters two levels above, Medic Tau was presumably overhauling his supplies, and Sindbad, ship's cat, asleep in some empty cabin.

Dane jerked his tunic into place, very much on his guard as he came to the head of the ramp. But it was not the supervisor-rigger. Dane, thoroughly used to unusual-appearing strangers, both human and alien, was impressed by this visitor.

He was tall, this quiet man, his great height accented by a fit leanness, a narrowness of waist and hip, a length of leg and arm. His main article of clothing was the universal shorts of the Xecho settler. But, being fashioned of saffron yellow, they were the more brilliant because of his darkness of skin. For he was not the warm brown of the Terran Negroes Dane had served beside, though he shared their general features. His flesh was really black, black with an almost bluish sheen. Instead of shirt or tunic, his deep chest was crossed by two wide straps, the big medallion marking their intersection giving forth flashes of gem fire when he breathed. He wore at his belt not the standard stun gun of a spaceman, but a weapon which resembled the more deadly Patrol blaster, as well as a long knife housed in a jeweled and fringed sheath. To the eye he was an example of barbaric force tamed and trimmed to civilized efficiency.

He saluted, palm out, and spoke Galactic Basic with only a suggestion of accent.

"I am Kort Asaki. I believe Captain Jellico expects me."

"Yes, sir!" Dane snapped to attention. So this was the Chief Ranger from fabulous Khatka, Xecho's sister planet.

The other ascended the cat ladder easily, missing no detail of the ship's interior as he passed. His expression was still one of polite interest as his guide rapped on the panel door of Jellico's cabin. And a horrible screech from Queex, the captain's pet hoobat,

drowned out any immediate answer. Then followed that automatic thump on the floor of the blue-feathered, crab-parrot-toad's cage, announcing that its master was in residence.

Since the captain's cordial welcome extended only to his guest, Dane regretfully descended to the mess cabin to make unskilled preparations for supper—though there was not much you could do to foul up concentrates in an automatic cooker.

"Company?" Tau sat beyond the cooking unit nursing a mug of Terran coffee. "And do you have to serve music with the meals, especially that particular selection?"

Dane flushed, stopped whistling in mid-note. "Terra Bound" was old and pretty well worn out; he didn't know why he always unconsciously sounded off with that.

"A Chief Ranger from Khatka just came on board," he reported, carefully offhand, as he busied himself reading labels. He knew better than to serve fish or any of its derivatives in disguise again.

"Khatka!" Tau sat up straighter. "Now there's a planet worth visiting."

"Not on a Free Trader's pay," commented Dane.

"You can always hope to make a big strike, boy. But what I wouldn't give to lift ship for there!"

"Why? You're no hunter. How come you want to heat jets for that port?"

"Oh, I don't care about the game preserves, though they're worth seeing, too. It's the people themselves—"

"But they're Terran settlers, or at least from Terran stock, aren't they?"

"Sure," Tau sipped his coffee slowly. "But there are settlers and settlers, son. And a lot depends upon when they left Terra and why, and who they were—also what happened to them after they landed out here."

"And Khatkans are really special?"

"Well, they have an amazing history. The colony was founded by escaped prisoners—and just one racial stock. They took off from Earth close to the end of the Second Atomic War. That was a race war, remember? Which made it doubly ugly." Tau's mouth twisted in disgust. "As if the color of a man's skin makes any difference in what lies under it! One side in that line-up tried to take over Africa—herded most of the natives into a giant concentration camp and practiced genocide on a grand scale. Then they were cracked themselves, hard and heavy. During the confusion some survivors in the camp staged a revolt, helped by the enemy. They captured an experimental station hidden in the center of the camp and made a break into space in two ships which had been built there. That voyage must have been a nightmare, but they were desperate. Somehow they made it out here to the rim and set down on Khatka without power enough to take off again—and by then most of them were dead.

"But we humans, no matter what our race, are a tough breed. The refugees discovered that climatically their new world was not too different from Africa, a lucky chance which might happen

only once in a thousand times. So they thrived, the handful who survived. But the white technicians they had kidnaped to run the ships didn't. For they set up a color bar in reverse. The lighter your skin, the lower you were in the social scale. By that kind of selective breeding the present Khatkans are very dark indeed.

"They reverted to the primitive for survival. Then, about two hundred years ago, long before the first Survey Scout discovered them, something happened. Either the parent race mutated, or, as sometimes occurs, a line of people of superior gifts emerged—not in a few isolated births, but with surprising regularity in five family clans. There was a short period of power struggle until they realized the foolishness of civil war and formed an oligarchy, heading a loose tribal organization. With the Five Families to push and lead, a new civilization developed, and when Survey came to call they were no longer savages. Combine bought the trade rights about seventy-five years ago. Then the Company and the Five Families got together and marketed a luxury item to the galaxy. You know how every super-jet big shot on twenty-five planets wants to say he's hunted on Khatka. And if he can point out a graz head on his wall, or wear a tail bracelet, he's able to strut with the best. To holiday on Khatka is both fabulous and fashionable—and very, very profitable for the natives and for Combine who sells transportation to the travelers."

"I hear they have poachers, too," Dane remarked.

"Yes, that naturally follows. You know what a glam skin brings on the market. Wherever you have a rigidly controlled export you're going to have poachers and smugglers. But the Patrol doesn't go to Khatka. The natives handle their own criminals. Personally, I'd cheerfully take a ninety-nine-year sentence in the Lunar mines in place of what the Khatkans dish out to a poacher they net!"

"So that rumor has spread satisfactorily!"

Coffee slopped over the brim of Tau's mug and Dane dropped the packet of steak concentrate he was about to feed into the cooker. Chief Ranger Asaki loomed in the doorway of the mess as suddenly as if he had been teleported to that point.

The medic arose to his feet and smiled politely at the visitor.

"Do I detect in that observation, sir, the suggestion that the tales I have heard were deliberately set to blast where they would do the most good as deterrents?"

A fleeting grin broke the impassive somberness of the black face.

"I was informed you are a man skilled in 'magic,' Medic. You certainly display the traditional sorcerer's quickness of wit. But this rumor is also truth." The quirk of good humor had gone again, and there was an edge in the Chief Ranger's voice which cut. "Poachers on Khatka would welcome the Patrol in place of the attention they now receive."

He came into the mess cabin, Jellico

behind him, and Dane pulled down two of the snap seats. He was holding a mug under the spout of the coffee dispenser as the captain made introductions.

"Thorson—our acting-cargo-master."

"Thorson," the Khatkan acknowledged with a grave nod of his head, and then glanced down to floor level with a look of surprise. Weaving a pattern about his legs, purring loudly, Sindbad was offering an unusually fervent welcome of his own. The Ranger went down on one knee, his hand out for Sindbad's inquiring sniff. Then the cat butted that dark palm, batted at it playfully with claw-sheathed paw.

"A Terran cat! It is of the lion family?"

"Far removed," Jellico supplied. "You'd have to add a lot of bulk to Sindbad to promote him to the lion class."

"We have only the old tales." Asaki sounded almost wistful as the cat jumped to his knee and clawed for a hold on his chest belts. "But I do not believe that lions were ever so friendly toward my ancestors."

Dane would have removed the cat, but the Khatkan arose with Sindbad, still purring loudly, resting in the crook of his arm. The Ranger was smiling with a gentleness which changed the whole arrogant cast of his countenance.

"Do not bring this one to Khatka with you, Captain, or you will never take him away again. Those who dwell in the inner courts would not let him vanish from their sight. Ah, so this pleases you, small lion?" He rubbed Sindbad gently under the throat and the cat stretched his neck, his yellow eyes half closed in bliss.

"Thorson," the Captain turned to Dane, "that arrival report on my desk was the final one from Combine?"

"Yes, sir. There's no hope of the Rover setting down here before that date."

Asaki sat down, still holding the cat. "So you see, Captain, fortune has arranged it all. You have two tens of days. Four days to go in my cruiser, four days for your return here, and the rest to explore the preserve. We could not ask for better luck, for I do not know when our paths may cross again. In the normal course of events I will not have another mission to Xecho for a year, perhaps longer. Also—" He hesitated and then spoke to Tau. "Medic, Captain Jellico has informed me that you have made a study of magic on many worlds."

"That is so, sir."

"Do you then believe that it is real force, or that it is only a superstition for child-people who set up demons to howl petitions to when some darkness falls upon them?"

"Some of the magic I have seen is trickery, some of it founded upon an inner knowledge of men and their ways which a shrewd witch doctor can use to his advantage. There always remains"—Tau put down his mug, "—there always remains a small residue of happenings and results for which we have not yet found any logical explanations—"

"And I believe," Asaki interrupted, "it is also true that a race can be condi-

tioned from birth to be sensitive to forms of magic so that men of that blood are particularly susceptible." That was more of a statement than a question, but Tau answered it.

"That is very true. A Lamorian, for example, can be 'sung' to death. I have witnessed such a case. But upon a Terran or another off-world man the same suggestion would have no effect."

"Those who settled Khatka brought such magic with them." The Chief Ranger's fingers still moved about Sindbad's jaw and throat soothingly, but his tone was chill, the coldest thing in the cramped space of the mess cabin.

"Yes, a highly developed form of it," Tau agreed.

"More highly developed perhaps than even you can believe, Medic!" That came in a hiss of cold rage. "I think that its present manifestation—death by a beast that is not a beast—could be worth your detailed study."

"Why?" Tau came bluntly to the point.

"Because it is a killing magic and it is being carefully used to rid my world of key men, men we need badly. If there is a weak point in this cloudy attack shaping against us, we must learn it, and soon!"

It was Jellico who added the rest. "We are invited to visit Khatka and survey a new hunting range as Chief Ranger Asaki's personal term guests."

Dane drew a deep breath of wonder. Guest rights on Khatka were jealously guarded—they were too valuable to their owners to waste. Whole families lived on the income from the yearly rental of even half a one. But the Rangers, by right of office, had several which they could grant to visiting scientists or men from other worlds holding positions similar to their own. To have such an opportunity offered to an ordinary Trader was almost incredible.

His wonder was matched by Tau's and must have been plain to read for the Chief Ranger smiled.

"For a long time Captain Jellico and I have exchanged biological data on alien life-forms—his skill in photographing such, his knowledge as an xenobiologist are widely recognized. And so I have permission for him to visit the new Zoboru preserve, not yet officially opened. And you, Medic Tau, your help, or at least your diagnosis, we need in another direction. So, one expert comes openly, another not so openly. Though, Medic, your task is approved by my superiors. And"—he glanced at Dane—"perhaps to muddle the trail for the suspicious, shall we not ask this young man also?"

Dane's eyes went to the captain. Jellico was always fair and his crew would have snapped into action on his word alone—even if they were fronting a rain of Thorkian death darts and that order was to advance. But, on the other hand, Dane would never have asked a favor, and the best he hoped for was to be able to perform his duties without unfavorable comment upon their commission. He had no reason to believe Jellico was willing to agree to this.

"You have two weeks' planet-side

leave coming, Thorson. If you want to spend it on Khatka....'' Jellico actually grinned then. ''I take it that you do. When do we up-ship, sir?''

''You said that you must wait for the return of your other crew members—shall we say mid-afternoon tomorrow?'' The Chief Ranger stood up and put Sindbad down though the cat protested with several sharp meows.

''Small lion,'' the tall Khatkan spoke to the cat as to an equal, ''this is your jungle, and mine lies elsewhere. But should you ever grow tired of traveling the stars, there is always a home for you in my courts.''

When the Chief Ranger went out the door, Sindbad did not try to follow, but he uttered one mournful little cry of protest and loss.

''So he wants a trouble shooter, does he?'' Tau asked. ''All right, I'll try to hunt out his goblins for him; it'll be worth that to visit Khatka!''

Dane, remembering the hot glare of the Xecho spaceport, the sea one could not swim in, contrasted that with the tridees he had seen of the green hunters' paradise on the next planet of the system. ''Yes, sir!'' he echoed and made a haphazard choice for the cooker.

''Don't be too lighthearted,'' Tau warned. ''I'll say that any stew which was too hot for that Ranger to handle might give us burned fingers—and quick. When we land on Khatka, walk softly and look over your shoulder, and be prepared for the worst.''

2

Lightning played along the black ridges above them, and below was a sheer drop to a river which was only a silver thread. Under their boots, man-made and yet dominating the wildness of jungle and mountain, was a platform of rock slabs, fused to support a palace of towering yellow-white walls and curved cups of domes, a palace which was also half fortress, half frontier post.

Dane set his hands on the parapet of the river drop, blinked as a lightning bolt crackled in a sky-splitting glare of violet fire. This was about as far from the steaming islands of Xecho as a man could imagine.

''The demon graz prepare for battle.'' Asaki nodded toward the distant crackling.

Captain Jellico laughed. ''Supposed to be whetting their tusks, eh? I wouldn't care to meet a graz that could produce such a display by mere tusk whetting.''

''No? But think of the reward for the tracker who discovers where such go to die. To find the graveyard of the graz herds would make any man wealthy beyond dreams.''

''How much truth is there in that legend?'' Tau asked.

The Chief Ranger shrugged. ''Who can say? This much is true: I have served my life in the forests since I could walk. I have listened to the talk of Trackers, Hunters, Rangers in my father's courtyards and field camps since I could understand their words. Yet never has any man reported the finding of a body of a graz that died a natural death. The scav-

engers might well account for the bulk of flesh, but the tusks and the bones should be visible for years. And this, too, I have seen with my own eyes: a graz close to death, supported by two of its kind and being urged along to the big swamps. Perhaps it is only that the suffering animal longs for water at its end, or perhaps in the heart of that morass there does lie the graz graveyard. But no man has found a naturally dead graz, nor has any returned from exploring the big swamps...."

Lightning on peaks which were like polished jet—bare rock above, the lush overgrowth of jungle below. And between, this fortress held by men who dared both the heights and the depths. The wildly burgeoning life of Khatka had surrounded the off-worlders since they had come here. There was something untameable about Khatka; the lush planet lured and yet repelled at the same time.

"Zoboru far from here?"

The Chief Ranger pointed north in answer to the captain's question.

"About a hundred leagues. It is the first new preserve we have prepared in ten years. And it is our desire to make it the best for tri-dee hunters. That is why we are now operating taming teams—"

"Taming teams?" Dane had to ask.

The Chief Ranger was ready enough to discuss his project.

"Zoboru is a no-kill preserve. The animals, they come to learn that after a while. But we cannot wait several years until they do. So we make them gifts." He laughed, evidently recalling some incident. "Sometimes, perhaps, we are too eager. Most of our visitors who wish to make tri-dees want to picture big game—graz, amplet, rock apes, lions..."

"Lions?" echoed Dane.

"Not Terran lions, no. But my people, when they landed on Khatka, found a few animals that reminded them of those they had always known. So they gave those the same names. A Khatkan lion is furred, it is a hunter and a great fighter, but it is not the cat of Terra. However, it is in great demand as a tri-dee actor. So we summon it out of lurking by providing free meals. One shoots a poli, a water rat, or a landeer and drags the carcass behind a low-flying flitter. The lion springs upon the moving meat, which it can also scent, and the rope is cut, leaving a free dinner.

"The lions are not stupid. In a very short time they connect the sound of a flitter cutting the air with food. So they come to the banquet and those on the flitter can take their tri-dee shots at ease. Only there must also be care taken in such training. One forest guard on the Komog preserve became too enterprising. He dragged his kill at first. Then, to see if he could get the lions to forget man's presence entirely, he hung the training carcasses on the flitter, encouraging them to jump for their food.

"For the guard that was safe enough, but it worked too too well. A month or so later a Hunter was escorting a client through Komog and they swung low to get a good picture of a water rat emerging from the river. Suddenly there was a snarl behind them and they found

themselves sharing the flitter with a lioness annoyed at finding no meat waiting on board.

"Luckily, they both wore stass belts; but they had to land the flitter and leave until the lioness wandered off, and she seriously damaged the machine in her irritation. So now our guards play no more fancy tricks while on taming runs. Tomorrow—no," he corrected himself, "the day after tomorrow I will be able to show you how the process works."

"And tomorrow?" inquired the captain.

"Tomorrow my men make hunting magic." Asaki's voice was expressionless.

"Your chief witch doctor being?" questioned Tau.

"Lumbrilo." The Chief Ranger did not appear disposed to add to that but Tau pursued the subject.

"His office is hereditary?"

"Yes. Does that make any difference?" For the first time there was a current of repressed eagerness in the other's tone.

"Perhaps a vast amount of difference," Tau replied. "A hereditary office may carry with it two forms of conditioning, one to influence its holder, one to affect the public-at-large. Your Lumbrilo may have come to believe deeply in his own powers; he would be a very remarkable man if he did not. It is almost certain that your people unquestionably accept him as a worker of wonders?"

"They do so accept." Once more Asaki's voice was drained of life.

"And Lumbrilo does not accept something you believe necessary?"

"Again the truth, Medic. Lumbrilo does not accept his proper place in the scheme of things!"

"He is a member of one of your Five Families?"

"No, his clan is small, always set apart. From the beginning here, those who spoke for gods and demons did not also order men."

"Separation of church and state," commented Tau thoughtfully. "Yet in our Terran past there have been times when church and state were one. Does Lumbrilo desire that?"

Asaki raised his eyes to the mountain peaks, to the northward where lay his beloved work.

"I do not know what Lumbrilo wants, save that it makes mischief—or worse! This I tell you: hunting magic is part of our lives and it has at its core some of those unexplainable happenings which you have acknowledged do exist. I have used powers I can neither explain nor understand as part of my work. In the jungle and on the grasslands an offworlder must guard his life with a stass belt if he goes unarmed. But I—any of my men—can walk unharmed if we obey the rules of our magic. Only Lumbrilo does other things which his forefathers did not. And he boasts that he can do more. So he has a growing following of those who believe—and those who fear."

"You want me to face him?"

The Chief Ranger's big hands closed upon the rim of the parapet as if they could exert enough pressure to

crumble the hard stone. "I want you to see whether there is trickery in this. Trickery I can fight, for that there are weapons. But if Lumbrilo truly controls forces for which there is no name, then perhaps we must patch up an uneasy peace—or go down in defeat. And, offworlder, I come from a line of warriors—we do not drink defeat easily!"

"That I also believe," Tau returned quietly. "Be sure, sir, if there is trickery in this man's magic and I can detect it, the secret shall be yours."

"Let us hope that so it shall be."

Subconsciously, Dane had always associated the practice of magic with darkness and the night. But the next morning the sun was high and hot when he made one of the party coming down to a second and larger walled terrace where the Hunters, Trackers, Guards and other followers of the Chief Ranger were assembled in irregular rows.

There was a low sound which was more a throb in the clear air about them, getting into a man's blood and pumping in rhythm there. Dane tracked the sound to its source: four large drums standing waist high before the men who tapped them delicately with the tips of all ten fingers.

The necklaces of claws and teeth about those dusky throats, the kilts of fringed hide, the crossed belts of brilliantly spotted or striped fur were in contrast to the very efficient and modern side arms each man wore, to the rest of the equipment sheathed and strapped at their belts.

There was a carved stool for the Chief Ranger, another for Captain Jellico. Dane and Tau settled themselves on the less comfortable seats of the terrace steps. Those tapping fingers increased their rate of beat, and the notes of the drums rose from the low murmur of hived bees to the mutter of mountain thunder still half a range away. A bird called from those inner courts of the palace from which the women never ventured.

Da—da—da—da.... Voices took up the thud-thud of the drums, the heads of the squatting men moved in a slow swing from side to side. Tau's hand closed about Dane's wrist and the younger man looked around, startled, to see that the medic's eyes were alight, that he was watching the assembly with the alertness of Sindbad approaching prey.

"Calculate the stowage space in Number One hold!"

That amazing order, delivered in a whisper, shocked Dane into obeying it. Number One hold ... there were three divisions now and the stowage was—He became aware that for a small space of time he had escaped the net being woven by the beat of the drum, the drone of voices, the nodding of heads. He moistened his lips. So that was how it worked! He had heard Tau speak often enough about self-hypnotism under such conditions, but this was the first time the meaning of it had been clear.

Two men were shuffling out of nowhere, wearing nothing on their dark bodies but calf-length kilts of tails, black tails with fluffy white tips, which swayed

uniformly in time to their pacing feet. Their heads and shoulders were masked by beautifully cured and semi-mounted animal heads displaying half-open jaws with double pairs of curved fangs. The black-and-white striped fur, the sharply pointed ears, were neither canine nor feline, but a weird combination of the two.

Dane gabbled two trading formulas under his breath and tried to think of the relation of Samantine rock coinage to galactic credits. Only this time his defenses did not work. From between the two shuffling dancers padded something on four feet. The canine-feline creature was more than just a head; it was a loose-limbed, graceful body fully eight feet in length, and the red eyes in the prick-eared head were those of a confident killer. It walked without restraint, lazily, with arrogance, its white-tufted tail swinging. And when it reached the mid-point of the terrace, it flung up its head as if to challenge. But words issued from between those curved fangs, words which Dane might not understand but which undoubtedly held meaning for the men nodding in time to the hypnotic cadence of that da—da—da....

"Beautiful!" Tau spoke in honest admiration, his own eyes almost as feral as those of the talking beast as he leaned forward, his fists on his knees.

Now the animal was dancing also, its paws following the pace set by the masked attendants. It must be a man in an animal skin. But Dane could hardly believe that. The illusion was too perfect. His own hands went to the knife sheath at his belt. Out of deference to local custom they had left their stun rods in the palace, but a belt knife was an accepted article of apparel. Dane slid the blade out surreptitiously, setting its point against the palm of his hand and jabbing painfully. This was another of Tau's answers for breaking a spell. But the white and black creature continued to dance; there was no blurring of its body lines into those of a human being.

It sang on in a high-pitched voice, and Dane noted that those of the audience nearest the stools where Asaki and the captain were seated now watched the Chief Ranger and the space officer. He felt Tau tense beside him.

"Trouble coming...." The warning from Tau was the merest thread of sound. Dane forced himself to look away from the swaying cat-dog, to watch instead the singers who were now furtively eying their lord and his guest. The Terran knew that there were feudal bonds between the Ranger and his men. But suppose this was a showdown between Lumbrilo and Asaki—whose side would these men take?

He watched Captain Jellico's hand slide across his knee, his fingers drop in touching distance of knife hilt. And the hand of the Chief Ranger, hanging lax at his side, suddenly balled into a fist.

"So!" Tau expelled the word as a hiss. He moved with sure-footed speed. Now he passed between the stools to confront the dancing cat-dog. Yet he did not look at that weird creature and its attendants. Instead his arms were flung high as if to ward off—or perhaps wel-

come—something on the mountain side as he shouted:

"Hodi, eldama! Hodi!"

As one, those on the terrace turned, looked up toward the slope. Dane was on his feet, holding his knife as he might a sword. Though of what use its puny length would be against that huge bulk moving in slow majesty toward them, he did not try to think.

Gray-dark trunk curled upward between great ivory tusks, ears went wide as ponderous feet crunched volcanic soil. Tau moved forward, his hands still upraised, clearly in greeting. That trunk touched skyward as if in salute to the man who could be crushed under one foot.

"Hodi, eldama!" For the second time Tau hailed the monster elephant and the trunk raised in silent greeting from one lord of an earth to another he recognized as an equal. Perhaps it had been a thousand years since man and elephant had stood so, and then there had been only war and death between them. Now there was peace and a current of power flowing from one to the other. Dane sensed this, saw the men on the terrace likewise drawing back from the unseen tie between the medic and the bull he had so clearly summoned.

Then Tau's upheld hands came together in a sharp clap and men held their breath in wonder. Where the great bull had stood there was nothing—except rocks in the sun.

As Tau swung around to face the catdog, that creature had no substance either. For he fronted no animal but a man, a small, lean man whose lips wrinkled back from his teeth in a snarl. His attendant priests fell back, leaving the spaceman and the witch doctor alone.

"Lumbrilo's magic is great," Tau said evenly. "I hail Lumbrilo of Khatka." His hand made the open-palmed salute of peace.

The snarl faded as the man brought his face under control. He stood naked, but he was clothed in inherit dignity. And there was power with that dignity, power and a pride before which even the more physically impressive Chief Ranger might have to give place.

"You have magic also, outlander," he replied. "Where walks this long-toothed shadow of yours now?"

"Where once the men of Khatka walked, Lumbrilo. For it was men of your blood who long, long past hunted this shadow of mine and made its body their prey."

"So that it now might have a blood debt to settle with us, outlander?"

"That you said, not I, man of power. You have shown us one beast, I have shown another. Who can say which of them is stronger when it issues forth from the shadows?"

Lumbrilo pattered forward, his bare feet making little sound on the stones of the terrace. Now he was only an arm's-length away from the medic.

"You have challenged me, off-world man." Was that a question or a statement? Dane wondered.

"Why should I challenge you, Lumbrilo? To each race its own magic. I come not to offer battle." His eyes held

steady with the Khatkan's.

"You have challenged me." Lumbrilo turned away and then looked back over his shoulder. "The strength you depend upon may become a broken staff, off-worlder. Remember my words in the time when shadows become substance, and substance the thinnest of shadows!"

3

"You are truly a man of power!"

Tau shook his head in answer to that outburst from Asaki.

"Not so, sir. Your Lumbrilo is a man of power. I drew upon his power and you saw the results."

"Deny it not! What we saw never walked this world."

Tau slung the strap of a trail bag over his shoulder. "Sir, once men of your blood, men who bred your race, hunted the elephant. They took his tusks for their treasure, feasted upon his flesh—yes, and died beneath the trampling of his feet when they were unlucky or unwary. So there is that within you which can even now be awakened to remember eldama in his might when he was king of the herd and need fear nothing save the spears and cunning of small, weak men. Lumbrilo had already awakened your minds to see what he willed you to see."

"How does he do this?" asked the other simply. "Is it magic that we see not Lumbrilo but a lion before us?"

"He weaves his spell with the drums, with the chant, by the suggestion his mind imposes upon yours. And, having woven his spell, he cannot limit it to just the picture he suggests if ancient racial memories raise another. I merely used the tools of Lumbrilo to show you yet another picture your people once knew well."

"And in so doing made an enemy." Asaki stood before a rack of very modern weapons. Now he made his selection, a silver tube with a stock curved to fit a man's shoulder. "Lumbrilo will not forget."

Tau laughed shortly. "No, but then I have merely done as you wished, have I not, sir? I have focused on myself the enmity of a dangerous man, and now you hope I shall be forced, in self-defense, to remove him from your path."

The Khatkan turned slowly, resting the weapon across his forearm. "I do not deny that, spaceman."

"Then matters here are indeed serious—"

"They are so serious," Asaki interrupted, speaking not only to Tau but to the other off-worlders as well, "that what happens now may mean the end of the Khatka that I know. Lumbrilo is the most dangerous game I have faced in a lifetime as a hunter. He goes, or we draw his fangs—or else all that I am, all I have labored here to build, will be swept away. To preserve this I will use any weapon."

"And I am now your weapon, which you hope will be as successful as that needler you are carrying." Tau laughed again, without much humor. "Let us hope I shall prove as effective."

Jellico moved out of the shadows. It

was just after dawn, and the grayness of the vanishing night still held in the corners of the armory. Deliberately he took his own stand before the arms racks and chose a short-barreled blaster. Only when its butt was cupped in his hand did he glance at his host.

"We came guesting, Asaki. We have eaten salt and bread under this roof."

"On my body and my blood it is," returned the Khatkan grimly. "I shall go down to the blackness of Sabra before you do, if the flames of death are against us." From his belt he flipped loose his knife and offered the hilt to Jellico. "My body for a wall between you and the dark, Captain. But also understand this: to me, what I do now is greater than the life of any one man. Lumbrilo and the evil behind him must be rooted out. There was no trickery in my invitation!"

They stood eye to eye, equal in height, in authority of person, and that indefinable something which made them both masters in their own different worlds. Then Jellico's hand went out, his fingertip flicked the hilt of the bared blade.

"There was no trickery," he conceded. "I knew that your need was great when you came to the Queen."

Since both the captain and Tau appeared to accept the situation, Dane, not quite understanding it all, was prepared to follow their lead. And for the moment they had nothing more in plan than to visit the Zoboru preserve.

They went by flitter—Asaki, one of his Hunter pilots, and the three from the Queen—lifting over the rim of mountains behind the fortress-palace and speeding north with the rising sun a flaming ball to the east. Below, the country was stark—rocks and peaks, deep purple shadows marking the veins of crevices. But that was swiftly behind and they were over a sea of greens, many shades of green, with yellow, blue, even red cutting into the general verdant carpet of treetops. Another chain of heights and then open land, swales of tall grass already burnt yellow by the steady sun. There was a river here, a crazy, twisted stream coiling nearly back upon itself at times.

Once more broken land, land so ravished by prehistoric volcanic action that it was a grotesque nightmare of erosion-whittled outcrops and mesas. Asaki pointed to the east. There was a dark patch widening out into a vast wedge.

"The swamp of Mygra. It has not yet been explored."

"You could air map it," Tau began.

The Chief Ranger was frowning. "Four flitters have been lost trying that. Com reports fail when they cross that last mountain ridge eastward. There is some sort of interference which we do not yet understand. Mygra is a place of death; later we may be able to travel along its fringe and then you shall see. Now—" He spoke to the pilot in his own tongue and the flitter pointed up-nose at an angle as they climbed over the highest peak they had yet seen in this mountainous land, to reach at last a country of open grass dotted with small forest stands. Jellico nodded approvingly.

"Zoboru?"

"Zoboru," Asaki assented. "We shall go up to the northern end of the preserve. I wish to show you the roosts of the fastals. This is their nesting season and the sight is one you will long remember. But we shall take an eastern course; I have two Ranger stations to check on the way."

It was after they left the second station that the flitter swung farther out eastward, again climbing over the chain of heights to sight one of the newly discovered wonders the staff at the last station had reported—a crater lake.

And the flitter skimmed down across water which was a rich emerald in hue, filling the crater from one rock wall to the other with no beach at the foot of those precipitant cliffs. As the machine arose to clear the far wall, Dane tensed. One of his duties aboard the Queen was flitter pilot for planetwise trips. And ever since they had taken off that morning he had unconsciously flown with the Khatkan pilot, anticipating each change or adjustment of the controls. Now he felt that sluggish response to the other's lift signal, and instinctively his own hand went out to adjust a power feed lever.

They made the rise, were well above the danger of the cliff wall. But the machine was not responding properly. Dane did not need to watch the pilot's swiftly moving hands to guess that they were in trouble. And his slight concern deepened into something else as the flitter began to drop nose again. In front of him, Captain Jellico shifted uneasily, and Dane knew that he, too, was alerted.

Now the pilot had plunged the power adjuster to the head against the control board. But the nose of the flitter acted as if it were overweighted or magnetically attracted by the rocks below. The best efforts of the man flying it could not keep it level. They were being drawn earthward, and all the pilot could do only delayed the inevitable crack-up. The Khatkan was turning the machine north to avoid what lay below, for here a long arm of the Mygra swamp clasped about the foot of the mountain.

The Chief Ranger spoke into the mike of the com unit while the pilot continued to fight against the pull which was bringing them down. Now the small machine was below the level of the volcanic peak which cradled the lake, and the mountain lay between them and the preserve.

Asaki gave a muffled exclamation, slapped the com box, spoke more sharply into the mike. It was apparent he was not getting the results he wanted. Then with a quick glance about he snapped an order:

"Strap in!"

His Terran companions had already buckled the wide webbing belts intended to save them from crash shock. Dane saw the pilot push the button to release fend cushions. In spite of his pounding heart, a small fraction of his brain recognized the other's skill as the Khatkan took a course to bring them down on a relatively level patch of sand and gravel.

Dane raised his head from the shel-

ter of his folded arms. The Chief Ranger was busy with the pilot, who lay limply against the controls. Captain Jellico and Tau were already pulling at the buckles of their protective crash belts. But one look at the front of the flitter told Dane that it would not take to the air again without extensive repairs. Its nose was bent up and back, obscuring the forward view completely. However, the pilot had made a miraculously safe landing considering the terrain.

Ten minutes later, the pilot restored to consciousness and the gash in his head bandaged, they held a council of war.

"The com was off, too. I did not have a chance to report before the crash," Asaki put the situation straightly. "And our exploring parties have not yet mapped this side of the range; it has a bad reputation because of the swamp."

Jellico measured the heights now to their west with resigned eyes. "Looks as if we climb."

"Not here," the Chief Ranger corrected him. "There is no passing through the crater lake region on foot. We must travel south along the edge of the mountain area until we do find a scalable way into the preserve region."

"You seem very certain we are not going to be rescued if we stay right here," Tau observed. "Why?"

"Because I'm inclined to believe that any flitter that tries to reach us may run into the same trouble. Also, they have no com fix on us. It will be at least a day or more before they will even begin to count us missing, and then they will have the whole northern portion of the preserve to comb; there are not enough men here—I can give you a multitude of reasons, Medic."

"One of which might be sabotage?" demanded Jellico.

Asaki shrugged. "Perhaps. I am not loved in some quarters. But there may also be something fatal to flitters here as there is over Mygra. We thought the crater lake district safely beyond the swamp influence, but it may not be so."

But you took the chance of traveling over it, Dane thought, though he did not comment aloud. Was this another of the Chief Ranger's attempts to involve them in some private trouble of his own? Though to deliberately smash up a flitter and set them all afoot in this wilderness was a pretty drastic move.

Asaki had started to unload emergency supplies from the flitter. They each had a trail bag for a pack. But when the pilot staggered over to pull out a set of stass belts and Jellico began to uncoil them, the Chief Ranger shook his head.

"With the feeder beam shut off by the mountains, I fear those will no longer work."

Jellico tossed one on the crumpled nose of the flitter and punched its button with the tip of the needler barrel. Then he threw a rock at the dangling belt. The stone landed, taking the wide protective band with it to the ground. That force field which should have warded off the missile was not working.

"Oh, fine!" Tau opened his trail bag to pack concentrates. Then he smiled crookedly. "We aren't signed in for kill-

ing licenses, sir. Do you pay our fines if we are forced to shoot a hole through something that disputes the right of way?"

To Dane's surprise, the Chief Ranger laughed. "You are off preserve now, Medic Tau. The rules do not cover wild land. But I would suggest we now hunt a cave before nightfall."

"Lions?" asked Jellico.

Dane, remembering the black and white beast Lumbrilo had presented, did not enjoy that thought. They had—his gaze went from man to man checking weapons—the needler Asaki carried, and another the pilot had slung by its carrying strap over his shoulder. Tau and the captain both were armed with blasters and he had a fire ray and a force blade, both considered small arms but deadly enough perhaps even to dampen a lion's enthusiasm for the chase.

"Lions, graz, rock apes," Asaki fastened the mouth of his trail bag. "All are hunters or killers. The graz send out scouts, and they are big and formidable enough to have no enemies. Lions hunt with intelligence and skill. Rock apes are dangerous, but luckily they cannot keep silent when they scent their prey and so give one warning."

As they climbed up-slope from the flitter, Dane, looking back, saw that perhaps Asaki was right in his belief that they had better try to help themselves rather than wait for rescue. Putting aside the excuse of fearing another crack-up, the wrecked flitter made no outstanding mark on the ground. The higher they climbed, the less it could be distinguished from the tumble of rocks about it.

He had lagged a little behind and, when he hurried to catch up, found Jellico standing with his distance vision lenses to his eyes, directing them toward that shadow marking the swamp. As the younger spaceman reached him, the captain lowered the glasses and spoke:

"Take your knife, Thorson, and hold it close to that rock—over there." He pointed to a rounded black knob protruding from the soil a little off their path.

Dane obeyed, only to have the blade jerk in his hand. And when he loosened his hold in amazement, the steel slapped tight against the stone.

"Magnetic!"

"Yes. Which might explain our crash. Also this." Jellico held out a field compass to demonstrate that its needle had gone completely mad.

"We can use the mountain range itself for a guide," Dane said with more confidence than he felt.

"True enough. But we may have trouble when we head west again." Jellico let the lenses swing free on their cord about his neck. "If we were wrecked on purpose"—his mouth tightened and the old blaster burn on his cheek stretched as did his jaw set—"then someone is going to answer a lot of questions—and fast!"

"The Chief Ranger, sir?"

"I don't know. I just don't know!" The captain grunted as he adjusted his pack and started on.

If fortune had failed them earlier, she smiled on them now. Asaki discovered a cave before sundown, located not too far from a mountain stream. The Ranger sniffed the air before that dark opening as the Hunter pilot shed his equipment and crept forward on his hands and knees, his head up and his nostrils expanding as he, too, tested the scent from the cave mouth.

Scent? It was closer to a stench, and one ripe enough to turn the stomach of an off-worlder. But the Hunter glanced back over his shoulder and nodded reassuringly.

"Lion. But old. Not here within five days at least."

"Well enough. And even old lion scent will keep away rock apes. We'll clean some and then we can rest undisturbed," was his superior's comment.

The cleaning was easy for the brittle bedding of dried bracken and grass the beast had left burned quickly, cleansing with both fire and smoke. When they raked the ashes out with branches, Asaki and Nymani brought in handfuls of leaves which they crumpled and threw on the floor, spreading an aromatic odor which banished most of the foulness.

Dane, at the stream with the canteens to fill, chanced upon a small pool where there was a spread of smooth yellow sand. Knowing well the many weird booby traps one might stumble into on a strange world, the Terran prospected carefully, stirring up the stand with a stick. Sighting not so much as a water insect or a curious fish, he pulled off his boots, rolled up his breeches and waded in. The water was cool and refreshing, though he dared not drink it until the purifier was added. Then, with the filled canteens knotted together by their straps, he put on his boots and climbed to the cave where Tau waited with water tablets.

Half an hour later Dane sat cross-legged by the fire, turning a spit strung with three small birds Asaki had brought in. One foot closer to the heat began to tingle and he eased off his boot; his cramped toes suddenly seeming to have doubled in size. He was staring wide-eyed at these same toes, puffed, red, and increasingly painful to the touch, when Nymani squatted beside him, inspected his foot closely, and ordered him to take off his other boot.

"What is it?" Dane found that shedding the other boot was a minor torture in itself.

Nymani was cutting tiny splinters, hardly thicker than a needle, from a stick.

"Sand worm—lays eggs in flesh. We burn them out or you have bad foot."

"Burn them out!" Dane echoed, and then swallowed as he watched Nymani advance a splinter to the fire.

"Burn them," the Khatkan repeated firmly. "Burn tonight, hurt some tomorrow; all well soon. No burn—very bad."

Dane ruefully prepared to pay the consequences of his first brush with the unpleasant surprises Khatka had to offer.

4

Dane regarded his throbbing feet morosely. Nymani's operations with burning splinters had been hard to take, but he had endured them without disgracing himself before the Khatkans, who appeared to regard such a mishap as just another travel incident. Now, with Tau's salve soothing the worst of the after affects, the Terran was given time to reflect upon his own stupidity and the fact that he might now prove a drag on the whole party the next morning.

"That's queer...."

Dane was startled out of the contemplation of his misery to see the medic on his knees before their row of canteens, the vial of water purifier held to the firelight for a closer inspection.

"What's the matter?"

"We must have hit with a pretty hard thump back there. Some of these pills are powder! Have to guess about the portion to add." With the tip of his knife blade Tau scraped a tiny amount of pill fragments into each waiting canteen. "That should do it. But if the water tastes a little bitter, don't let it bother you."

Bitter water, Dane thought, trying to flex his still swollen toes, was going to be the least of his worries in the morning. But he determined that his boots should go on at daybreak, and he would keep on his feet as long as the others did, no matter how much it cost him.

And when they set out shortly after daybreak, wanting to move as far as they could before the heat hours when they must rest, the going was not too bad. Dane's feet were tender to the touch, but he could shuffle along at the tail of the procession with only Nymani playing rear guard behind him.

Jungle lay before them and bush knives began to swing, clearing their path. Dane took his turn with the rest at that chore, thankful that the business of cutting their way through that mass of greenery slowed them to a pace he could match—if not in comfort, then by willpower.

But the sand worms were not the only troubles one could encounter on Khatka. Within an hour Captain Jellico stood sweating and speaking his mind freely in the native tongues of five different planets while Tau and Nymani worked as a team with skinning knives. They were not flaying the spaceman, but they came near to that in places as they worried a choice selection of tree thorns out of his arm and shoulder. The captain had been unfortunate enough to trip and fall into the embrace of a very unfriendly bush.

Dane inspected a fallen tree for evidence of inimical wild life, and then rested his blanket between him and it as a protecting cushion before he sat down. These trees were not the towering giants of the true forests, but rather oversized bushes which had been made into walls by twined vines. Brilliant bursts of flowers were splotches of vivid color, and the attendant insect life was altogether too abundant. Dane tried to tally his immunity shots and hoped for the best. At the moment he wondered why anyone would want to visit Khatka, let alone pay some astronomical sum for the privilege. Though he could also

guess that the plush safari arranged for a paying client might be run on quite different lines from their own present trek.

How could a tracker find his way through this? With the compasses playing crazy tricks into the bargain! Jellico knew that the compasses were off, yet the captain had followed Asaki's lead without question, so he must trust the Ranger's forest craft. But Dane wished they were clear on the mountain side again.

Time had little meaning in that green gloom. But when they worked through to meet rock walls again, the sun said it was well into the after part of the day. They sheltered for a breather under the drooping limbs of one of the last trees.

"Amazing!" Jellico, his torn arm in a sling across his chest, came down-slope from the higher point where he had been using the distance lenses. "We struck straight across and cut off about ten miles by that jungle jog. Now I believe all that I've heard of your people's ability to cross wilderness and not lose their built in 'riding beams,' sir. With the compasses out, I'll admit I've been nourishing a healthy set of doubts."

Asaki laughed. "Captain, I do not question your ability to flit from world to world, or how you have learned to set up trade with strange humans and non-humans alike. To each his own mystery. On Khatka every boy before he becomes a man must learn to navigate the jungle, and with no instruments to help him, only what lies in here." He touched his thumb to his forehead. "So through generations we have developed our homing instincts. Those who did not, also did not live to father others who might have had the same lack. We are hounds who can run on a scent, and we are migrators who have better than a compass within our own bodies."

"Now we take to climbing again?" Tau surveyed the way before them critically.

"Not at this hour. That sun on the upward slopes can cook a man's skin were he to touch any rock. We wait...."

Waiting for the Khatkans was a chance to sleep. They curled up on their light blankets. But the three spacemen were restless. Dane would have liked to have taken off his boots, but feared he could not replace them; and he could tell from the way the captain shifted his position that Jellico was in pain too. Tau sat quietly, staring at nothing Dane could see, unless it was a tall rock thrust out of the slope like a finger pointing skyward.

"What color is that rock?"

Surprised, Dane gave the stony finger closer attention. To him it was the same color as most of the other rocks, a weathered black which in certain lights appeared to carry a brownish film.

"Black, or maybe dark brown?"

Tau looked past him to Jellico. The captain nodded.

"I'd agree with that."

Tau cupped his hands over his eyes for a moment and his lips moved as if he were counting. Then he took his hands away and stared up-slope. Dane watched the medic's eyelids blink slowly. "Nothing but black or brown?"

Tau pressed.

"No." Jellico supported his injured arm upon his knees, leaning forward, as intent upon the designated rock as if he expected it to assume some far more startling appearance.

"Queer," Tau said to himself, and then added briskly, "You're right, of course. That sun can play tricks with one's eyes."

Dane continued to watch the finger rock. Maybe strong sunlight could play tricks, but he could see nothing odd about that rough lump. And since the captain asked no questions of Tau, he did not quite want to either.

It was perhaps a half-hour later, and the medic and Jellico had both succumbed to the quiet, the heat, and their own fatigue, when Dane did sight a movement up-slope. The throbbing in his feet was worse now that he had nothing to occupy his mind but his own troubles, and he was sitting facing the finger rock.

Was that what Tau had seen earlier? That quick movement around the side of the rough pillar? But if so, why the question of color? There it was again! And now, centering all his attention on that one point, the Terran picked out the outline of a head—a head grotesque enough to be something conjured out of Lumbrilo's sorcerer's imagination. Had Dane not seen its like among the tri-dee prints in Captain Jellico's collection, he would have believed that his eyes were playing tricks.

It was a bullet-shaped head, embellished by two out-sized prick ears, the hair-tufted pointed tips of which projected well above the top of the skull. Round eyes were set deeply in sunken pits. The mouth was a swinish snout from which lolled a purple tongue, though the rest of that gargoyle head was very close in color to the rock against which it half rested.

Dane had no doubts that the rock ape was spying upon the small camp. Having heard tales of those semi-intelligent animals—the most intelligent native creatures of Khatka—most of which were concerned with their more malignant characteristics, Dane was alarmed. That lurker could be an advance scout of some pack. And a pack of rock apes, if able to surprise their prey, were formidable opponents.

Asaki stirred, sat up. And that round head above turned to follow the Chief Ranger's every move.

"Above ... by the finger rock ... to the right...." Dane kept his voice close to a whisper. When he saw the sudden constriction of muscle across the Khatkan's bare shoulders, he knew that the other had heard and understood.

Only, if Asaki had spotted the rock ape, he did not betray his knowledge. The Khatkan got lithely to his feet. Then one of those feet stirred Nymani into the instant wakefulness of the wilderness-trained man.

Dane slid his hand about the bole of the tree and touched Jellico, watched the captain's gray eyes open with a similar awareness. Asaki picked up his needler. Weapon in hand, he whirled and fired almost in one connected

movement. It was the fastest shot Dane had ever seen.

The gargoyle head lifted away from the rock, and then turned to one side as its body, somehow vaguely obscene in its resemblance to the human form, fell away, to sprawl limply down-slope.

Though the dead rock ape had not had a chance to give tongue, there came a cry from above, a coughing, deep-throated hawking. Down the steep incline bumped a round white ball, bouncing past the tumbled carcass of the ape, sailing up into the air, to strike and burst open a few feet away.

"Back!" With one arm Asaki sent Jellico, his nearest neighbor, tumbling back into the jungle. Then the Chief Ranger pumped a stream of needle rays into the remains of the ball. A shrill, sweet humming arose as red motes, vivid as molten copper in the sunlight, climbed on wings beating too fast to be seen.

The debris of the nest smoked into nothing. But no needle ray could hope to stop all the poisonous army issuing forth from it, fighting mad, to seek any warm-blooded creature within scenting distance. The men threw themselves into the brush, rolling in the thick mold of the vegetable decay on the ground, rubbing its moist plaster over their bodies in frantic haste.

Red-hot fire, far worse than any of the splinter torment Dane had undergone the night before, pierced between his shoulders. He rolled on his back, shoving himself along, both to kill the fire-wasp and coat the sting with cooling mold. Cries of pain told him that he was not the only sufferer, as all dug hands into the slimy stuff under them and slapped it over their faces and heads.

"Apes...." That half shout got through to alert the men on the jungle floor. True to their nature, the rock apes, now streaming downhill, were coughing their challenges, advertising their attack. And it was only that peculiarity of their species which saved their intended victims.

The apes came forward, partially erect, at a shambling run. The first two, bulls close to six feet, went down under fire from Asaki's needler. A third somehow escaped, swerving to the left, and came bounding at an angle toward Dane. The Terran jerked free his force blade as that swine snout split wide to show greenish tusks and the horrible stench of the creature's body made him gasp.

A taloned paw clawed at him eagerly, slipped from his slime-covered body just as he brought the force blade up. Foul breath coughed in his face and he stumbled back as the heavy body of the ape crashed against him, cut in half by the weapon. To Dane's sickened horror the paws still clawed for him, the fangs still gnashed as he rolled free of the mangled body and somehow got to his feet.

The roar of a blaster, of two blasters, drowned out the clamor of the apes as Dane drew his fire ray, set his shoulders against a tree bole and prepared to fight it out. He fired, saw a smaller and

more nimble enemy go down screeching. Then there were none left on their shaggy feet, though some on the ground dragged themselves forward, still striving to reach the men.

Dane slapped a fire-wasp from his leg. He was glad of the support of the tree at his back as the smell of the ape's blood drenching him from chest level down, and the mess on the ground, made his stomach churn.

When he could control his retching, he straightened. To his relief he saw that all the others were on their feet, apparently unharmed. But Tau, catching sight of the younger spaceman, gasped and started for him.

"Dane! What did they do?"

His junior laughed a little hysterically. "Not mine...." He swabbed with a handful of grass at his bloodied breeches and blundered on into the sunlight.

Nymani found them a foam-flecked stream below a miniature falls where the swift current prevented the lurking of sand worms. They stripped eagerly, cleaning first themselves and then their fouled clothing while Tau tended the wealth of fire-wasp stings. There was little he could do to relieve the swelling and pain, until Asaki produced a reed-like plant which, chopped in sections, yielded a sticky purple liquid that dried on the skin as a tar gum—the native remedy. So, glued and plastered, they climbed away from the water and prepared to spend the night in a hollow between two leaning rocks, certainly not as snug as the cave but a fortress of sorts.

"And credit-happy space hoppers pay a fortune for an outing like this!" Tau commented bitterly, hunching well forward so that a certain stung portion of his anatomy would not come in contact with the rock beneath him.

"Hardly for this," Jellico replied, and Dane saw Nymani grin one-sidedly, his other cheek puffed and painted sticky purple.

"We do not always encounter apes and fire-wasps in the same day," supplied the Chief Ranger. "Also, guests at the preserves wear stass belts."

Jellico snorted. "I don't think you'd get any repeats from your clients otherwise! What do we meet tomorrow? A herd of graz on stampede, or something even more subtle and deadly?"

Nymani got up and walked a little way from their rock shelter. He turned down-slope and Dane saw his nostrils expand as they had when he had investigated the cave.

"Something is dead," he said slowly. "A very large something. Or else—"

Asaki strode down to join his men. He gave a curt nod and Nymani skidded on down the mountain side.

"What is it?" Jellico asked.

"It might be many things. There is one I hope it is not," was the Chief Ranger's somewhat evasive reply. "I will hunt a labbla—there was fresh spoor at the stream." He set off along their back trail to return a half hour later, the body of his kill slung across one shoulder. He was skinning it when Nymani trotted back.

"Well?"

"Death pit," supplied the Hunter.

"Poachers?" Jellico inquired.

Nymani nodded. Asaki continued his task, but there was a glint in his dark eyes as he butchered with sure and expert strokes. Then he glanced at the shadow extending beyond the rocks.

"I, too, would see," he told Nymani.

Jellico arose, and Dane, interested, followed. Some five minutes later none of them needed the native keenness of smell to detect the presence of some foulness ahead. The odor of corruption was almost tangible in the sultry air. And it grew worse until they stood on the edge of a pit. Dane retreated hurriedly. This was as bad as the battlefield of the rock apes. But the captain and the two Khatkans stood calmly assessing the slaughter left by the hide poachers.

"Glam, graz, hoodra," Jellico commented. "Tusks and hides—the full line of trade stuff."

Asaki, his expression bleak, stepped back from the pit. "Day old calves, old ones, females—all together. They kill wantonly and leave those they do not choose to pelt."

"Trail—" Nymani pointed eastward. "Leads to Mygra swamp."

"The swamps!" Asaki was shaken. "They must be mad!"

"Or know more about this country than your men do," Jellico corrected.

"If poachers can enter Mygra, then we can follow!"

But not now, Dane protested silently. Certainly Asaki did not mean that they were to track outlaws into swamps the Khatkan had already labeled unexplored death traps!

5

Sitting up, Dane stared wide-eyed into the dark. A handful of glowing coals, guarded by rocks, was the center of their camp. He hunched up to that hardly knowing why he moved. His hands were shaking, his skin damp with sweat no heat produced. Yet, now that he was conscious of the night, the Terran could not remember the nightmare from which he had just awakened, though he was left with a growing apprehension which he could not define. What prowled out there in that dark? Walked the mountain side? Listened, spied and waited?

Dane half started to his feet as a form did move into the dim light of the fire. Tau stood there, regarding him with sober intensity.

"Bad dream?"

The younger man admitted to that with a nod, partly against his will.

"Well, you aren't the only one. Remember any of it?"

With an effort, Dane looked away from the encircling dark. It was as if the fear which had shaken him awake, now embodied, lurked right there.

"No." He rubbed sleep-smarting eyes.

"Neither did I," Tau remarked. "But both of 'em must have been jet-powered."

"I suppose one could expect to have nightmares after yesterday." Dane ad-

vanced the logical explanation, yet at the same time something deep inside him denied every word of it. He had known nightmares before; none of them had left this aftertaste. And he wanted no return of sleep tonight. Reaching to the pile of wood he fed the fire as Tau settled down beside him.

"There is something else...." the medic began, and then fell silent. Dane did not press him. The younger man was too busy fighting a growing desire to whirl and aim the fire ray into that darkness, to catch in its withering blast that lurking thing he could feel padded there, biding its time.

Despite his efforts Dane did drowse again before morning, waking unrefreshed, and, to his secret dismay, with no lessening of his odd dislike for the country about them.

Asaki did not suggest that they trail the poachers into the morass of Mygra. Instead the Chief Ranger was eager to press on in the opposite direction, find a way over the range to the preserve where he could assemble a punitive force to deal with the outlaws. So they began an upward climb which took them away from the dank heat of the lowlands, into the parched blaze of the sunbaked ledges above.

The sun was bright, far too bright, and there were few shadows left. Yet Dane, stopping to drink sparingly from his canteen, could not lose that sense of eyes upon him, of being tracked. Rock apes? Cunning as those beasts were, it was against their nature to trail in utter silence, to be able to carry through a long-term project. Lion, perhaps?

He noted that Nymani and Asaki took turns at rear guard today, and that each was alert. Yet, oddly enough, none of them mentioned the uneasiness they must all share.

They had a dry climb, finding no mountain stream to renew their water supply. All being experienced in wilderness travel, they made a mouthful of liquid go a long way. When the party halted slightly before midday, canteens were still half full.

"Haugh!"

They jerked up, hands on weapons. A rock ape, its hideous body clearly seen here, capered, coughed, spat. Asaki fired from the hip and the thing screeched, clawed at its chest where the dark blood spewed out, and raced for them. Nymani cut the beast down and they waited tensely for the attack of the thing's tribe, which should have followed the abortive lunge on the part of their scout. But there was nothing—neither sound nor movement.

What did follow froze them all momentarily. That mangled body began to move again, drew itself together, crawled toward them. Dane knew that it was impossible that the creature could live with such wounds. Yet the beast advanced, its head lolling on its hunched shoulders so that the eyes were turned blindly up to the full glare of the sun, while it crawled to reach the man it could not see.

"Demon!" Nymani dropped his needler, shrank back against the rocks.

As the thing advanced, before their

eyes the impossible happened. Those gaping wounds closed, the head straightened on the almost invisible neck, the eyes glared once more with life, and slaver dripped from the swine snout.

Jellico caught up the needler Nymani had dropped. With a coolness Dane envied, the captain shot. And for the second time the rock ape collapsed, torn to ribbons.

Nymani screamed, and Dane tried to choke back his own cry of horrified protest. The dead thing put on life for the second time, crawled, got somehow to its feet, healed itself, and came on. Asaki, his face greenish-pale, stepped out stiffly as if each step he took was forced by torture. He had dropped his needler. Now he caught up a rock as large as his own head, raised it high with arms on which the muscles stood out like ropes. He hurled the stone, and Dane heard as well as saw the missile go home. The rock ape fell for the third time.

When one of those taloned paws began to move again, Nymani broke. He ran, his screams echoing thinly in the air, as the thing lurched up, the gory mess of its head weaving about. If his feet would have obeyed him, Dane might have followed the Khatkan. As it was, he drew his ray and aimed it at that shambling thing. Tau struck up the barrel.

The medic's face was livid; there was the same horror in his eyes. But he moved out to front that monster.

A spot of shadow coalesced on the ground, deepened in hue, took on substance. Crouched low facing the rock ape, its haunches quivering for a deadly spring, narrowed green eyes holding on its prey, was a black leopard.

The tiny forward and backward movements of its body steadied, and it arched through the air, brought down the ape. A pitting, snarling tangle rolled across the slope—and was gone!

Asaki's hands shook as he drew them down his sweating face. Jellico readied a second clip in the needler mechanically. But Tau was swaying so that Dane leaped to take the shock of the other's weight as he collapsed. Only for a moment did the medic hang so, then he struggled to stand erect.

"Magic?" Jellico's voice, as controlled as ever, broke the silence.

"Mass hallucination," Tau corrected him. "Very strong."

"How!" Asaki swallowed and began again. "How was it done?"

The medic shook his head. "Not by the usual methods, that is certain. And it worked on us—on me—when we weren't conditioned. I don't understand that!"

Dane could hardly believe it yet. He watched Jellico stride to where the tangle of struggling beasts had rolled, saw him examine bare ground on which no trace of the fight remained. They must accept Tau's explanation; it was the only sane one.

Asaki's features were suddenly convulsed with a rage so stark that Dane realized how much a veneer was the painfully built civilization of Khatka.

"Lumbrilo!" The Chief Ranger made of that name a curse. Then with a visible effort he controlled his emotions and came to Tau, looming over the slighter medic almost menacingly.

"How?" he demanded for the second time.

"I don't know."

"He will try again?"

"Not the same perhaps—"

But Asaki had already grasped the situation, was looking ahead.

"We shall not know," he breathed, "what is real, what is not."

"There is also this," Tau warned. "The unreal can kill the believer just as quickly as the real!"

"That I know also. It has happened too many times lately. If we could only find out how! Here are no drums, no singing—none of the tricks to tangle a man's mind that he usually uses to summon his demons. So without Lumbrilo, without his witch tools, how does he make us see what is not?"

"That we must discover and speedily, sir. Or else we shall be lost among the unreal and the real."

"You also have the power. You can save us!" Asaki protested.

Tau drew his arm across his face. Very little of the normal color had returned to his thin, mobile features. He still leaned against Dane's supporting arm.

"A man can do only so much, sir. To battle Lumbrilo on his own ground is exhausting and I can not fight so very often."

"But will he not also be exhausted?"

"I wonder...." Tau gazed beyond the Khatkan to the barren ground where leopard and rock ape had ceased to be. "This magic is a tricky thing, sir. It builds and feeds upon a man's own imagination and inner fears. Lumbrilo, having triggered ours, need not strive at all, but let us ourselves raise that which will attack us."

"Drugs?" demanded Jellico.

Tau gave a start sufficient to take him out of Dane's loose hold. His hand went to the packet of aid supplies which was his own care, his eyes round with wonder and then shrewdly alert.

"Captain, we disinfected those thorn punctures of yours. Thorson, your foot salve.... But, no, I didn't use anything—"

"You forget, Craig, we all had scratches after that fight with the apes."

Tau sat down on the ground. With feverish haste he unsealed his medical supplies, laid out some containers. Then delicately he opened each, examined its contents closely by eye, by smell, and two by taste. When he was done he shook his head.

"If these have been in any way meddled with, I would need laboratory analysis to detect it. And I don't believe that Lumbrilo could hide traces of his work so cleverly. Or has he been off-planet? Had much to do with off-worlders?" he asked the Chief Ranger.

"By the nature of his position he is forbidden to space voyage, to have any close relationship with any off-worlder. I do not think, medic, he would choose

your healing substances for his mischief. There would only be chance to aid him then in producing the effects he wants. Though there is often call for first aid in travel, he could not be certain you would use any of your drugs on this trip to the preserve."

"And Lumbrilo was certain. He threatened something such as this," Jellico reminded them.

"So it would be something which we would all use, which we had to depend upon...."

"The water!" Dane had been holding his own canteen ready to drink. But as that possible explanation dawned in his mind, he smelled instead of tasted the liquid sloshing inside. There was no odor he could detect. But he remembered Tau commenting on the powdered purifier pills at their first camp.

"That's it!" Tau dug further into his kit, brought out the vial of white powder with its grainy lumps. Pouring a little into the palm of his hand he smelled it, touched it with the tip of his tongue. "Purifier and something else," he reported. "It could be one of half a dozen drugs, or some native stuff from here which we've never classified."

"True. There are drugs we have found here." Asaki scowled down at the green mat of jungle. "So our water is poisoned?"

"Do you always purify it?" Tau asked the Chief Ranger. "Surely during the centuries since your ancestors landed on Khatka you must have adapted to native water. You couldn't have lived otherwise. We must use the purifier, but must you?"

"There is water and water." Asaki shook his own canteen, his scowl growing fiercer as the gurgle from its depths was heard. "From springs on the other side of the mountains we drink—yes. But over here, this close to the Mygra swamps, we have not done so. We may have to chance it."

"Do you think we are literally poisoned?" Jellico bored directly to the heart of their private fears.

"None of us have been drinking too heavily," Tau observed thoughtfully. "And I don't believe Lumbrilo had outright killing in mind. How long the effect will last I have no way of telling."

"If we saw one rock ape," Dane wondered, "why didn't we see others? And why here and now?"

"That!" Tau pointed ahead on the trail Asaki had picked for their ascent. For a long moment Dane could see nothing of any interest there and then he located it—a finger of rock. It did not point directly skyward this time, in fact it slanted so that its tip indicated their back trail. Yet in outline the spire was very similar to that outcrop from which the real rock ape had charged them the day before.

Asaki exclaimed in his own tongue and slapped his hand hard against the stock of the needler.

"We saw that and so again we saw an ape also! Had earlier we been charged by graz or jumped by a lion in such a place, then again we would have been faced by graz or lion here!"

Captain Jellico gave a bark of laugh-

ter colored only by the most sardonic humor. "Clever enough. He merely leaves it to us to select our own ghost and then repeat the performance in the next proper setting. I wonder how many rocks shaped like that one there are in these mountains? And how long will a rock ape continue to pop out from behind each one we do find?"

"Who knows? But as long as we drink this water we're going to continue to have trouble; I feel safe in promising that," Tau replied. He put the vial of doctored purifier into a separate pocket of his medical kit. "It may be a problem of how long we can go without water."

"Perhaps," Asaki said softly. "Only not all the water on Khatka comes running in streams."

"Fruit?" Tau asked.

"No, trees. Lumbrilo is not a hunter, nor could he be certain when and where his magic would go to work. Unless the flitter was deliberately sabotaged, he was planning for us to use our canteens in the preserve. That is lion country and there are long distances between springs. This is jungle below us and there is a source there I think we can safely tap. But first I must find Nymani and prove to him that this is truly devilry of a sort, but not demon inspired."

He was gone, running lightly downslope in the direction his hunter had taken, and Dane spoke to Captain Jellico.

"What's this about water in trees, sir?"

"There is a species of tree here, not too common, with a thickened trunk. It stores water during the rainy season to live on in the hot months. Since we are in the transition period between rains, we could tap it—if we locate one of the trees. How about that, Tau? Dare we drink that without a purifier?"

"Probably a choice of two evils, sir. But we have had our preventive shots. Personally, I'd rather battle disease than take a chance on a mind-twisting drug. You can go without water just so long...."

"I'd like to have a little talk with Lumbrilo," remarked Jellico, the mildness in his voice very deceptive.

"I'm going to have a little talk with Lumbrilo, if and when we see him again!" promised Tau.

"What are our chances, sir?" Dane asked. He screwed the cap back on his canteen, his mouth feeling twice as dry since he knew he dared not drink.

"Well, we've faced gambles before." Tau sealed the medical kit. "I'd like to see one of those trees before sundown. And I don't want to face another pointed rock today!"

"Why the leopard?" asked Jellico reflectively. "Another case of using flame to fight fire? But Lumbrilo wasn't among those present to be impressed."

Tau rubbed his hand across his forehead. "I don't really know, sir. Maybe I could have made the ape vanish without a counter projection, but I don't think so. With these hallucinations it is better to battle one vision against another for the benefit of those involved. And I can't even tell you why I selected a leopard—it just flashed into mind as about the fastest and most deadly animal fighter I

could recall at that moment."

"You'd better work out a good list of such fighters." Jellico's grim humor showed again. "I can supply a few if you need them. Not that I don't share your hope we won't see any more trigger rocks. Here comes Asaki with his wandering boy."

The Chief Ranger was half-leading, half-supporting his hunter, and Nymani seemed only half-conscious. Tau got to his feet and hurried to meet them. It would appear that their search for the water tree would be delayed.

6

They withdrew to a spot hacked from the edge of the jungle, leaving a screen of green between them and the traitorous up-slope. But within the few hours of daylight left them, it was proven that Asaki had been overly optimistic in his hopes of discovering a water tree. They were now in a narrow tongue of land between the range and the swamps, and this territory was limited. Nymani, still shaken, was of little help, and the spacemen did not dare to strike out into unexplored land alone.

So they mouthed dry concentrates and dared not drink. Dane was tempted to pour out the liquid in his canteen. Water so close to hand was a continual torment. And, now that they were away from the heights and the possibility of more finger-shaped rocks, surely the threat in that moisture was small in comparison to the needs of his body. Only that caution which was drilled into every Free Trader supplied a brake to his thirst.

Jellico drew the back of his hand across cracked lips. "Suppose we should draw lots—some of us drink, one or two not. Could we manage that way until we were over the mountains?"

"I wouldn't want to chance it, unless we are left with no other choice. There is no way of telling how long the drug works. Frankly, right now I'm not even sure I could detect a hallucination for very long under these conditions," was Tau's discouraging verdict.

If any of them slept that night, they did so only in snatches. The apprehension which had come with the previous night was back, intensified, and that lurking, indefinable fear rode them hard.

They were shaken out of their private terrors shortly after dawn. There were always sounds to be heard in the jungle: the cries of unseen birds, the crash of some tree eaten alive by parasitic sapping. But what broke now was no bird call, no isolated tree falling. A trumpeting roar, the crackling smash of vegetation, heralded a real menace. Asaki spun to face northward, though there was nothing to be seen there except the unshaken wall of the jungle.

"Graz! Graz on stampede!" Nymani joined his superior.

Jellico arose swiftly and Dane read on the captain's face the seriousness of this. The off-worlder turned to his own men with a sharp order. "On your feet! We may have to move on the double. Up-mountain?" he demanded of the Chief Ranger.

The other was still listening, not only with his ears but with the whole of his tense body. Three of the deer-like creatures they had hunted for food broke out of the green wall, fled past the men as if the latter was invisible. And behind them, the hunted now and not the hunter, came a lion, its strikingly marked black-and-white hide dramatic in the light of the morning. It showed fangs in a snarl and then was gone in one huge bound. More deer things, scurrying of other small creatures, moving too fast for clear identification, and behind them the fury of destruction which marked the headlong advance of Khatka's largest mammals slamming through the jungle.

They had started up-slope when Nymani cried out. A white bulk, hard to distinguish in that light against the gray of the earth, headed after them. Dane had a fleeting glimpse of curled tusks, of an open mouth, raw-red and wide enough to engulf his whole head, of shaggy legs driving at an unbelievable pace. Asaki snapped a beam from the needler. The white monster roared and came on. They dived for the scant cover offered as the graz bull died, not two yards away from the Chief Ranger, its heavy body skidding along the earth with the force of its speed as it went down.

"That did it!" Jellico sighted coolly with his blaster as a second bull, fighting mad, tore from the jungle and pounded at them. Behind it a third tusked head thrust out of the brush, large eyes searched for an enemy. Dane studied the dead bull, but the animal did not come to life this time. These were not hallucinations. And the malignancy of the rock apes, the cunning of the native Khatkan lion, were pallid things compared to a graz herd on the rampage.

The second bull yelped with an almost canine complaint as Jellico's blaster caught it head-on. Blinded, the beast blundered ahead, climbing the mountain side. The third met a ray from Nymani's needler. But the Chief Ranger leaped from behind his sheltering rock to the one where the captain had taken refuge and pulled him into the open.

"They must not corner us here!"

Jellico agreed to that. "Come on!" he barked to Tau and Dane.

They fled along a rough way, trying to gain altitude, but finding a rising cliff wall which could not be easily climbed. Two more graz went down, one badly wounded, one safely dead. Behind them more white heads came from the brush. What original cause had started the stampede the fugitives could not guess, but now the fear and anger of the animals were centering upon them.

And, in spite of their efforts, the party was being herded into a pocket between the jungle below, where the main body of graz crashed along, and a steep wall. Given time to find the necessary finger and toe holds, a man might climb that wall, but they could not attempt it now. The portion of ledge on which they ran, stopped to fire, and then ran on again, angled to the southeast. And so they came to its end quickly, a drop ending in a plain of yellow-gray

mud studded with clumps of bleached vegetation which led, like steppingstones, toward a tangle of matted, sickly looking plants and reeds.

"All right," Tau faced around, "what do we do now? Space lift? And using what for wings or jets?"

As if the graz could sense that they now had their victims safely cornered, what must have been a goodly segment of the herd hooked their way from the jungle and started up. Puffing, digging in those sturdy legs which had to take the massive weight of their barrel-shaped bodies, they made their way determinedly up-grade. One might almost believe that they had intelligently planned this end for their drive.

"We go down!" Asaki yelled, and used his needler on the leader of that climbing platoon.

"The brush islands," Nymani amended. "I show you!" He thrust his needler at Jellico and was over the edge of the ledge, hanging by his hands and swinging his weight back and forth like a pendulum. At the up-swing of his body to the right, he let go and plunged out, landing half across one of the reed islets. The Khatkan clawed his way to his knees, gained his feet, and leaped for the next bit of solid ground.

"You, Thorson!" Jellico jerked his head at Dane and the younger spaceman holstered his fire ray, slipped gingerly over the drop and prepared to repeat Nymani's feat as best he could.

He was not quite as successful with his sidewise swing, landing with only his forearms across the islet, the rest of his body being swiftly embedded in what was ooze covered only with a thin crust of dried matter. The stench of the stuff was sickening, but the fear of being entrapped in it gave him the necessary impetus to push forward, though what was meant to be a swift half-dive was more of a worm's progress. He grabbed frantically at brittle stems, at coarse grass which cut like knives at his hands. But some of the material held and he lay face down on a lump which did not give under his weight.

There was no time to linger; he had to get to the next patch, to free this dubious landing place for the men embattled on the rise above. Stumbling up, Dane judged the distance with a space-trained eye and jumped to a knob Nymani had already quitted. The Khatkan was more than halfway along toward that promise of solid ground which the tangled mass of leprous vegetation led to, zigzagging expertly from islet to islet.

There was a crash and a roar behind. Dane balanced on the third of the minute islands to look back. He saw the lash of blaster fire on the top of the cliff, Tau on his knees on the first of their chain of steppingstones, and a graz sprawled head and forequarters in the sucking muck where it had dived past the two defenders above. Needler and blaster fired together again, and then Jellico swung over the cliff rim. Tau waved vigorously and Dane took off for the next islet, just making it by lucky chance.

The rest of the journey he took in a rush, trying not to think of anything but

the necessity of landing on some spot of firm ground. His last leap of all was too short, so that he went knee deep in a particularly evil-smelling pool where yellow scum spattered his breeches and he experienced the insidious pull of the bottomless stuff. A stout branch whipped across his shoulder and he caught it. With Nymani's wiry strength on the other end, Dane worked free and sat, white-faced and shivering, on a mat of brush, while the Khatkan hunter turned his attention to the safety of Tau, the next arrival.

More fortunate, or more skillful than Dane, the medic made the hop from the last tuft without mishap. But he was blowing heavily as he collapsed beside the other spaceman. Together they watched the progress of their captain.

Safe on the second tussock from the shore, Jellico halted, edged carefully around and used the needler Nymani had left with him. A shaggy head tossed and the bull fronting Asaki on the cliff went down. The Chief Ranger dodged quickly to the right and a second beast rushed out and over, to join its mired comrade in the swamp below. As Jellico shot again, the Khatkan slung his needler and went over to gain the first islet.

One more graz was wounded but luckily it hunched about, turning its formidable tusks on those that followed, thus keeping the path clear for its enemies. Jellico was making the journey, sure-footedly, with the Chief Ranger only one hillock behind. Tau sighed.

"Someday maybe this will be just another tall tale and we'll all be thought liars when we spout it," he observed. "That is if we survive to tell it. So now which way do we go? If I had my choice it would be up!"

When Dane pulled himself to his feet and surveyed their small refuge, he was ready to agree to that. For the space, packed with dead and dying vegetable matter until one sank calf deep, was a triangle with a narrow point running east into the swamp.

"They don't give up easily, do they?" Jellico looked back to the shore and the cliff. Though the wounded graz bull still held the heights against its fellows, there were others breaking from the jungle on the lower level, wandering back and forth to paw the earth, rip up soil with their tusks, and otherwise threaten anyone who would try to return to the strip they patrolled.

"They will not," Asaki answered bleakly. "Arouse a graz and it will trail you for days; kill any of the herd and you have little hope of escaping them on foot."

It would seem now that the swamp was a deterrent to pursuit. The two beasts that had fallen in the mire moaned in a pitiful rising note. They had ceased to struggle and several of their kind clustered on the shore near them, calling entreatingly. Asaki took careful aim with the needler and put one animal after another out of its misery. But the flash of those shots angered those on shore to a higher pitch of rage.

"No going back," he said. "At least not for several days."

Tau slapped a black, four-winged insect which had settled on his arm, its jaws wide open for a sampling bite. "We can't very well perch here until they forget all about us," he pointed out. "Not without water we can trust, and with the local wild life ready to test us for tasty eating."

Nymani had prowled along the swampward point of their island, and now he made his report.

"There is more high land to the east. Perhaps it will give us a bridge across."

At that moment Dane doubted his ability to make any more leaps from island to island. And it would seem Tau shared his discouragement.

"I don't suppose you could discourage our friends on shore there with a few more shots?"

Asaki shook his head. "We do not have clips enough to settle a whole herd. These might retreat from sight but they would be waiting for us in the bush, and that would mean certain death. We shall have to take the swamp road."

If Dane had considered their earlier march misery, this was sheer torture. Since footing was never secure, falls were frequent, and within a quarter-hour they were all plastered with evil-smelling slime and mud which hardened to rock consistency when exposed to the air. Painful as this was, it did protect a portion of their bodies from the insects with which the swamp was well stocked.

And, in spite of their efforts to find a way out, the only possible paths led them deeper into the center of the unexplored morass. At last Asaki called a halt and a council to consider retreat. To locate an island from which they could at least watch the shore appealed very strongly indeed.

"We have to have water." Tau's voice was a harsh croak, issuing out of a mask of green mud festooned with trailing weeds.

"This ground is rising." Asaki smacked the stock of his needler against the surface on which he crouched. "I think perhaps there may be clean land soon to come."

Jellico hitched his way up a sapling, now bending under his weight. Through the vision lenses he studied the route ahead.

"You're right about that," he called to the Chief Ranger. "There's a showing of the right sort of green to the left, about half a mile on. And," he glanced about at the westering sun, "we have about an hour yet of good light in which to make it. I wouldn't try such a run after dark."

That promise of green bolstered their weary spirits for a last exhausting effort. Once again they were faced with a series of islet leaps, and now they carried with them brush culled from the bigger tussocks to aid in times of need.

When Dane scrambled up the last pull, staggered, and went down to his knees again, he knew he was done. He did not even move at an excited cry from Nymani, echoed a moment later by Asaki. It was not until the latter leaned over him, a canteen open in his hand, that Dane aroused a little.

"Drink!" the Khatkan urged. "We

have found a water tree. This is fresh.''

The liquid might have been fresh, but it also had a peculiar taste, which Dane did not note until he had gulped down a generous swallow. At that moment he was past caring about anything but the fact that he did have a portion of drinkable stuff in hand.

Here the stunted, unnatural growth of the swamplands had given away to the more normal vegetation of the jungle-clad lowlands. Had they come clear across the swamp, Dane wondered dully, or was this only a large island in the midst of the stinking boglands?

He drank again and regained strength enough to crawl to where his shipmates lay. It was some time before he was interested in much besides the fact that he could drink when he wished. Then he watched Jellico waver to his feet, his head turned eastward. Tau, too, sat up as if alerted by the Queen's alarm buzzer.

The Khatkans were gone, perhaps back to the water tree. But all three of the spacemen heard that sound, a far off throbbing rhythm which was a vibration as well. Jellico looked to Tau.

''Drums?''

''Could be.'' The medic screwed the cap back on his canteen. ''I'd say we have company—only I'd like to know what kind!''

They might have been mistaken about the drums, but none of them could have been mistaken about the bolt which came out of nowhere to slice through a tree trunk as a knife might slash wet clay. Blaster—and a particular type of blaster!

''Patrol issue!'' Tau lay flat, squeezing himself against the earth as if he wished he could ooze into it.

Jellico wriggled toward the bush in answer to a low call from Asaki, and the others made a worm's progress in his wake. Under cover they found the Chief Ranger readying his needler.

''Poacher camp here,'' he explained bleakly. ''And they know about us.''

''A perfect end to a stinking day,'' remarked Tau dispassionately. ''We might have guessed something of this sort was waiting.'' He tried to rub away some of the dried clay coating his chin. ''But do poachers use drums?''

The Chief Ranger scowled. ''That is what Nymani has gone to find out.''

7

Darkness closed in while they waited for Nymani's return. There had been no further attack from the blaster wielder; perhaps he was only trying to pin them down where they were. Out over the swamp, weird patches of phosphorescence moved in small ghostly clouds, and bright dots of insects with their own built-in lighting systems flashed spark-fashion or sailed serenely on regular flight plans. At night the wonder of the place was far removed from the squalid reality of the day. They chewed on their rations, drank sparingly of the water, and tried to keep alert to any sight or sound.

That monotonous undertone, which might or might not be drums, continued

as a basic hum to the noises of the night, drowned out at intervals by a splash, a mutter or cry from some swamp creature. Beside Dane, Jellico stiffened, moved his blaster, as someone wriggled through the brush, trilling softly.

"Off-worlders," Nymani reported in gasps to Asaki, "and outlaws, too. They make a hunting sing—tomorrow they march for a killing."

Asaki rested his chin on his broad forearm. "Outlaws?"

"They show no lord's badge. But each I saw wears a bracelet of three, five, or ten tails. They are Trackers indeed, and Hunters of the best!"

"They have huts?"

"Not so. There are no dwellers in the inners courts here." Out of habit Nymani used the polite term for the women of his race. "I would say they tarry only for the space of a hunt. And on the boots of one I saw salt crust."

"Salt crust!" Asaki snapped and half arose. "So that is the type of lure they use. There must be a saline mire near here to pull game—"

"How many off-worlders?" Jellico broke in.

"Three who are Hunters, one who is different."

"How different?" questioned Asaki.

"He wears upon his body garments which are strange; on his head a round covering such as we see upon the off-worlders of the ships—"

"A spaceman!"

Asaki laughed harshly. "Why not? They must have some method of transporting their hides."

"You can't tell me," Jellico returned, "that anyone is able to set a ship down in this muck. It would simply be buried for all time."

"But, Captain, what type of a spaceport does a Free Trader need? Do you not planet your own ship on worlds where there are no waiting cradles, no fitter shops, none of the conveniences such as mark the field Combine maintains on Xecho?"

"Of course I do. But one does need a reasonably smooth stretch of territory, open enough so the tail flames won't start a forest fire. You don't ever ride a tail push down in a swamp!"

"Which testifies to a trail out of here, fairly well-traveled, and some kind of a usable landing space not too far away," Asaki replied. "And that could very well serve us."

"But they know we are here," Tau pointed out.

It was Nymani's turn to laugh. "Man from the stars, there is no trail so well-hidden that a Ranger of the preserves cannot nose it out, nor any Hunter—be he a two or five bracelet veteran—who can keep pinned down a determined man of the forest service!"

Dane lost interest in the argument at that moment. He was at the edge of their line, the nearest to the swamp, and he had been watching patches of ghostly light flitting above the rank waterweeds. For the past few moments those wisps of faded radiance had been gathering into a growing anthropomorphic

blot hanging over the morass several yards away. And the misty outlines were now assuming more concrete shape. He watched, unable to believe in what he was seeing. At first the general outline, non-defined as it was, made him think of a rock ape. But there were no pointed ears above the round skull, no snout on the visage turned in profile toward him.

More and more patches of swamp luminescence were drawn to that glowing figure. What balanced there now, as if walking the treacherous surface of the swampland, was no animal. It was a man, or the semblance of one, a small, thin man—a man he had seen once before, on the terrace of Asaki's mountain fortress.

The thing stood almost complete, its head cocked in what was an attitude of listening.

"Lumbrilo!" Dane identified it, still knowing that the witch doctor could not be standing there listening for them. But, to shake him still farther, the head turned at his cry. Only there were no eyes, no features on the white expanse which should have been a face. And somehow that made the monster more menacing, convincing Dane against sane logic that the thing was spying on them.

"Demon!" That was Nymani; and over his sudden quaver, robbed of all the confidence which had been there only moments earlier, came Asaki's demand:

"What stands there, Medic? Tell us that!"

"A whip to drive us out of hiding, sir. As you know as well as I. If Nymani spied upon them, then they have spied upon us in turn. And this, I think, also answers another question. If there is a canker of trouble on Khatka, then Lumbrilo is close to its root."

"Nymani!" The Chief Ranger's voice was the crack of a lash. "Will you forget again that you are a man, and run crying for shelter against a shaft of light? As this off-world Medic says, Lumbrilo fashions such as that to drive us into our enemies' hands!"

The shadow thing in the swamp moved, putting its foot forward on surface which would not bear the weight of a human body, taking a deliberate step and then another, heading for the concealing brush where the fugitives lay.

"Can you get rid of it, Tau?" Jellico asked in his usual crisp voice. He might have been inquiring about some problem aboard the Queen.

"I'd rather get at the source." There was a grim note in the Medic's reply. "And to do that I want to look at their camp."

"Well enough!" Asaki crept back in the brush.

The ghost of that which was not a man had reached the shore of the island, stood there, its blank head turned toward them. Weird as it was, now that the first shock of sighting it was over, the spacemen could accept and dismiss it as they had not been so able to dismiss the phantom rock ape.

"If that thing was sent to drive us," Dane ventured, "wouldn't we be play-

ing their game by going inland now?"

The Chief Ranger did not pause in his crawl to the left. "I think not. They do not expect us to arrive with our wits about us. Panic-stricken men are easy to pull down. This time Lumbrilo has overreached himself. Had he not played that game with the rock ape, he might have been able to stampede us now."

Though the white thing continued to move inland, it did not change course to fall in behind them on the new route. Whatever it was, it did not possess a mind.

There was a rustling, faint but distinguishable. Then Dane caught Nymani's whisper.

"The one left to watch the inland trail does so no longer. We need not fear an alarm from him. Also, here is another blaster for our use."

Away from the open by the swamp, the gloom was deeper. Dane was guided only by the noises of the less-experienced Jellico and Tau made in their progress.

They edged down into a small cut, floored with reeds and mud, where some of the moisture from the soggy land about them gathered into a half pool. Straight through this swale the Khatkans set course.

The drum beat grew louder. Now there was a glow against the dark—fire ahead? Dane squirmed forward and at last gained a vantage point from which to survey the poachers' camp.

There were shelters erected there, three of them, but they were mainly roofs of leaves and branches. In two of them were stored bales of hides sewn into plastic cloth, ready to ship. Before the third hut lounged four off-worlders. And Nymani was very right; one of them wore ship's uniform.

To the right of the fire was a ring of natives and another man, slightly apart, who beat the drum. But of the witch doctor there was no sign. And Dane, thinking of that mist-born thing at the swamp's edge, shivered. He could believe Tau's explanation of the drug which produced hallucinations back on the mountain side. But how that likeness fashioned of phosphorescence had been sent by an absent man to hunt his enemies was a eerie puzzle.

"Lumbrilo is not here." Nymani's thoughts must have been moving along the same path.

Dane could hear movements in the dark beside him.

"There's a long-distance com unit in that third hut," Tau observed.

"So I see," Jellico snapped. "Could you reach your men over the mountain with that, sir?"

"I do not know. But if Lumbrilo is not here, how can he make his image walk the night?" the Chief Ranger demanded impatiently.

"We shall see. If Lumbrilo is not here—he shall come." And the promise in Tau's tone was sure. "Those off-worlders will have to be out of action first. And with that walking thing sent to drive us in, they must be waiting for us."

"If they have sentries out, I will silence them!" promised Nymani.

"You have a plan?" Asaki's wide

shoulders and upheld head showed for an instant against the light from the camp.

"You want Lumbrilo," Tau replied. "Very well, sir, I believe I can give him to you, and in the doing discredit him with your Khatkans. But not with the off-worlders free to move."

The program was not going to be easy, Dane decided. Every one of the poachers was armed with a Patrol blaster of the latest type, and a small part of his mind speculated as to what would be the result of that information conveyed to official quarters. Free Traders and Patrolmen did not always see eye-to-eye over the proper action to be taken on the galactic frontier. The Queen's crew had had one such brush with authority in the immediate past. But each realized that the other had an important role in the general scheme of things, and if it came to a clash between the law and outlaws, Free Traders fought beside the Patrol.

"Why not give them what they expect—with reservations?" inquired Jellico. "They've set us up to be stampeded into camp, flying ahead of that tame ghost of theirs. Suppose we do stampede—after Nymani has removed any sentries—stampede so well we sweep right over them? I want to get at that com unit."

"You don't think they'll just mow us down as we come in?"

"You delivered a blow to Lumbrilo's pride; he won't be satisfied with just your burning," the captain answered Tau, "not if I'm any judge of character. And we'd furnish hostages of a sort—especially the Chief Ranger. No, if they had wanted to kill us they would have shot us off those islands when we came here. There would have been no playing around with ghosts and goblins."

"There is reason in your words. And it is true they would like to have me, those outlaws down there," Asaki commented. "I am of the Magawaya and we have pressed always for stronger security methods to be used against such as they. But I do not see how we can take the camp."

"We won't go in from the front—as they expect us to do. But a try from the north, getting at the off-worlders first.... Three men causing enough disturbance to cover operations of the other two...."

"So?" There was a moment of silence as the Chief Ranger evaluated that. Then he added a few comments of his own.

"That off-worlder who wears spaceman's clothing, his weapon is not drawn, though the others are ready. But I believe that you are right in thinking they expect to be warned by sentries. Those we can see to. Suppose then, Captain, you and I play the fear-crazed men running from demons. Nymani will cover us from the dark and your two men—"

Tau spoke up, "Give me leave to flush out our other quarry, sir. I believe I can keep him occupied. Dane, you'll take the drum."

"Drum?" With his mind on blasters, it was startling to be offered a noise-maker.

"It's your business to get that drum. And when you get it I want you to beat out 'Terra Bound.' You certainly can play that, can't you?"

"I don't understand," Dane began and then swallowed the rest of his protest, knowing that Tau was not going to explain why he needed to have the hackneyed popular song of the spaceways played in a Khatkan swamp. As a Free Trader he had had quite a few odd jobs handed him during the past couple of years, but this was the first time he had been ordered to serve as a musician.

They waited for Nymani through dragging minutes. Surely those in the camp would expect their arrival soon now? Dane's fire ray was in his hand as he measured the distance to the drummer's stand.

"It is done," Nymani whispered from the darkness behind them. Jellico and the Chief Ranger moved to the left; Tau crept to the right and Dane pushed level with the medic.

"When they move," Tau's lips were beside his ear, "jump for that drum. I don't care how you get it, but get it and keep it!"

"Yes, sir!"

There was a wailing cry from the north, a howl of witless fear. The singers stopped in mid-note, the drummer paused, his hand uplifted. Dane darted forward in a plunge which carried him to that man. The Khatkan did not have time to rise from his knees as the barrel of the fire rod struck his head, sending him spinning. Then the drum was cradled in the spaceman's arm, close to his chest, his weapon aimed across it at the startled natives.

The crackle of blaster fire, the shrill whine of needlers in action, raised a bedlam from the other end of the camp. Backing up a little, Dane went down on one knee, his weapon ready to sweep over the bewildered natives, the drum resting on the earth against his body. Keeping the fire rod steady, his left hand went to work, not in the muted cadence the Khatkan drummer had chosen, but in hard and vigorous thumps which rolled across the clamor of the fight. There was no forgetting the beat of "Terra Bound" and he delivered it with force, so that the familiar da-dah-da-da droned loud enough to awaken the whole camp.

Dane's move appeared to completely baffle the Khatkan outlaws. They stared at him, the whites of their eyes doubly noticeable in their dark faces, their mouths a little agape. As usual the unexpected had driven them off guard. He dared not look away from that gathering to see how the fight at the other end of the camp was progressing. But he did see Tau's advance.

The medic came into the light of the fire, not with his ordinary loose-limbed spaceman's stride, but mincingly, with a dancing step, and he was singing to the drum beat of "Terra Bound." Dane could not understand the words, but he knew that they patterned in and out of the drum beats, weaving a net between singer and listeners as Lumbrilo had woven his net on the mountain terrace.

Tau had them! Had every one of the native outlaws ensnared, so that Dane rested his weapon across his knee and took up the lower beat with the fingers of his right hand as well.

Da-dah-da-da.... The innocuous repetitive refrain of the original song which had been repeating itself in his mind faded, and somehow he caught the menace in the new words Tau was mouthing.

Twice the medic shuffled about a circle of his own making. Then he stooped, took a hunting knife from the belt of the nearest Khatkan and held it point out toward the dark east. Dane would not have believed the medic knew the drill he now displayed, for with no opponent save the dancing firelight he fought a knife duel, feinting, striking, twisting, retreating, attacking, all in time to the beat of the drum Dane was no longer conscious of playing. And as he strove it was very easy to picture another fighting against him. So that when the knife came up in a vicious thrust which was the finish of his last attack, Dane stared stupidly at the ground, half expecting to see a body lying there.

Once more Tau ceremoniously saluted with his blade to the east. Then he laid it on the ground and stood astride its gleaming length.

"Lumbrilo!" His confident voice arose above the call of the drum. "Lumbrilo—I am waiting."

8

Vaguely aware that the clamor at the other end of the camp had died away, Dane muted the sound of his drum. Over its round top he could watch the Khatkan outlaws; their heads bobbed and swayed in time to the beat of his fingers. He, too, could feel the pull of Tau's voice. But what would come in answer? That shadowy thing which had been loosed to drive them here? Or the man himself?

To Dane, the ruddy light of the fire dimmed, yet there was no actual dying of those flames which coiled and thrust around the wood. And the acrid scent of burning was thick. How much of what followed was real, how much the product of his tense nerves, Dane was never afterwards able to tell. In fact, whether all the witnesses there saw the same sights could be questioned. Did each man, Khatkan and off-worlder, see only what his particular set of emotions and memories dictated?

Something swept in from the east, something which was not as tangible as the creature born of swamp mist. Rather it came as an unseen menace to the fire, and all that fire signifies to human kind—security, comradeship, a weapon against the age-old forces of the dangerous night. Was that threat, too, only in their minds? Or had Lumbrilo some power to so shape his hatred?

The unseen was cold; it sapped a man's strength, bit at his brain, weighted his hands and feet, weakened him. It strove to soften him into clay another could remold. Nothingness, darkness, all that was opposed to life and warmth and reality, arose in the night, gathered together against them.

Yet still Tau fronted that invisible

wave, his head high. And between his sturdily planted feet the knife gleamed bright with a radiance of its own.

"Ahhh—" Tau's voice curled out, to pierce that creeping menace. Then he was singing again, the cadence of his unknown words rising a little above the pattern wrought by the drum.

Dane forced his heavy hands to continue the beat, his wrists to rise and fall in defiance of that which crept to eat their strength and make them less then men.

"Lumbrilo! I, Tau, of another star, another sky, another world, bid you come forth and range your power against mine!" Now there was a sharper note in that demand, the snap of an order.

He was answered by another wave of the black negation—stronger, rolling up to smash them down, as a wave in the heavy surf of a wild ocean pounds its force against the beach. This time Dane thought he could see that dark mass. He tore his eyes away before it took on substance, concentrating on the movements of his hands against the drum head, refusing to believe that hammer of power was rising to flatten them all. He had heard Tau describe such things in the past. But told in familiar quarters on board the Queen, such experiences were only stories. Here was danger unleashed. Yet the medic stood unbowed as the wave broke upon him in full.

And, advancing under the crest of that lick of destruction, came its controller. This was no ghost drawn from the materials of the swamp; this was a man, walking quietly, his hands as empty as Tau's, yet grasping weapons none of them could see.

In the firelight, as the wave receded sullenly, men moaned, lay face down upon the ground, beat their hands feebly against the earth. But, as Lumbrilo came on from the shadows, one of them got to his hands and knees, moving with small tortured jerks. He crawled toward Tau, his head lolling on his shoulders as the head of the dead rock ape had done. Dane patted the drum with one hand while, with the other, he groped for his fire ray. He tried to shout in warning and found that he could not utter a sound.

Tau's arm moved, raised from his side, made a circling motion.

The creeping man, his eyes rolled up in his head until only the whites gleamed blindly in the limited light, followed that gesture. He drew level with the medic, passed beyond toward Lumbrilo, whining as a hound prevented from obeying his master might lament.

"So be it, Lumbrilo," Tau said. "This is between you and me. Or do you not dare to risk your power against mine? Is Lumbrilo so weak a one that he must send another to do his will?"

Raising both hands again the medic brought them down, curling inward, until he stooped and touched them to the ground. When he straightened once again the knife was in his grasp and he tossed it behind him.

The smoke from the fire swirled out in a long tongue, coiled about Lumbrilo and was gone. A black and white beast

stood where the man had been, its tufted tail lashing, its muzzle a mask of snarling hate and blood lust.

But Tau met that transformation with laughter which was like the lash of a whip.

"We both be men, you and I, Lumbrilo. Meet me as a man and keep those trickeries for those who have not the clear sight. A child plays as a child, so—" Tau's voice came in a rumble, but Tau was gone. The huge, hairy thing which swayed in his place turned a gorilla's beast visage to his enemy. For a breathless moment Terran ape confronted Khatkan lion. Then the spaceman was himself again. "The time for games is over, man of Khatka. You have tried to hunt us to our deaths, have you not? Therefore death shall be the portion of the loser now."

Lion vanished, man stood watching, alertly, as swordsman might face swordsman with a blood feud lying on their blades. To Dane's eyes the Khatkan made no move. Yet the fire leaped high, as if freshly fed, and flames burst from the wood, flew into the air, red and perilous birds, darting at Tau until they outlined him from the ground under his boots to an arch over his head. They united and spun faster until Dane, watching with dazzled eyes, saw the wheel become a blur of light, hiding Tau within its fiery core. His own wrists ached with the strain of his drumming as he lifted one hand and tried to shield his sight from the glare of that pillar of fire.

Lumbrilo was chanting—a heavy blast of words. Dane stiffened; his traitorous hands were falling into the rhythm of that other song! Straightaway he raised both from the drum head, brought them down in a discordinate series of thumps which bore no relation to either the song Tau wanted or that which Lumbrilo was now crooning. Thump—thump—thump—Dane beat it out frantically, belaboring the drum head as he wanted to sink his fists home on the body of the Khatkan witch doctor.

The pillar of fire swayed, fluttered as if a wind drove it—and was gone. Tau, unmarked, smiled.

"Fire!" He pointed his fingers at Lumbrilo. "Would you try earth, and water, and air also, wizard? Call hither your whirlwind, up your flood, summon the land to quake. None of those shall bring me down!"

Shapes came flooding out of the night, some monstrous, some human, streaming past Lumbrilo to crowd into the circle of firelight. Some Dane thought he knew, some were strangers. Men wearing space uniforms, or the dress of other worlds, women—they strode, wept, mingled with the monsters to laugh, curse, threaten.

Dane guessed that Lumbrilo sent now against the Terran the harvest of the medic's own memories. He shut his eyes against this enforced intrusion upon another's past, but not before he saw Tau's face, strained, fined to the well-shaped bones beneath the thin flesh, holding still a twisted smile as he met each memory, accepted the pain it held

for him, and set it aside unshaken.

"This, too, has no power any longer, man who walks in the dark."

Dane opened his eyes. Those crowding wraiths were fading, losing substance. Lumbrilo crouched, his lips drawn back from his teeth, his hatred plain to read.

"I am not clay to be molded by your hands, Lumbrilo. And now I say that the time has come to call an end—"

Tau raised his hands slowly once again, holding them away from his body, palms pointing earthward. And beneath them, on either side of the spaceman, two black shadows gathered on the surface of the ground.

"You have fettered yourself with your own bounds. As you have been the hunter, so shall you now be the hunted."

Those shadows were growing as plants might issue from the packed soil of the camping ground. When his hands were shoulder high, Tau held them steady. Now on either side of his tautly held body crouched one of the black-and-white lions with which Lumbrilo had identified his own brand of magic throughout the year.

Lumbrilo's "lion" had been larger than life, more intelligent, more dangerous, subtly different from the normal animal it counterfeited. So now were these. And both of them raised their heads to gaze intently into the medic's face.

"Hunt well, brothers in fur," he said slowly, almost caressingly. "Him whom you hunt shall grant you sport in the going."

"Stop it!" A man leaped from the shadows behind the witch doctor. Firelight made plain his off-world dress, and he swung up a blaster, aiming at the nearest of the waiting beasts. That flash struck true, but it neither killed nor even singed the fine fur of the animal's pelt.

As the blaster's aim was swung from beast to man, Dane fired first. His ray brought a scream from the other, who dropped his weapon from a badly seared hand to reel back, cursing.

Tau waved his hands gently. The great animal heads turned obediently, until the red eyes were set on Lumbrilo. Facing them, the witch doctor straightened, spat out his hate at the medic:

"I do not run to be hunted, devil man!"

"I think you do, Lumbrilo. For you must taste fear now as you have made other men drink of it, so that it fills your blood and races through your body, clouds your mind to make of you less than a man. You have hunted out those who doubted your power, who stood in your chosen path, whom you wanted removed from the earth of Khatka. Do you doubt that they wait in the last dark for you now, ready to greet you, witch doctor? What they have known, you shall also know. This night you have shown me all that lies in my past that is weak, that was evil, that I may regret or find sorrow for. So shall you also remember through the few hours left you. Aye, you shall run, Lumbrilo!"

As he spoke, Tau approached the other, the two black-and-white hunters pacing beside him. Now he stooped and

caught up a pinch of soil and spat upon it three times. Then he threw the tiny clod of earth at the witch doctor. It struck Lumbrilo just above the heart and the man reeled under what might have been a murderous blow.

The Khatkan broke then, completely. With a wailing cry he whirled and ran, crashing into the brush as one who runs blindly and without hope. Behind him the two beasts leaped noiselessly together and all three were gone.

Tau swayed, put his hand to his head. Dane kicked away the drum, arose from his cramped position stiffly to go to him. But the medic was not yet done. He returned to stand over the prostrate native hunters and he clapped his hands sharply.

"You are men, and you shall act as men henceforth. That which was, is no longer. Stand free, for the dark power follows him who misused it, and fear no longer eats from your basins, drinks from your cups, or lies beside you on the sleep mats."

"Tau!" Jellico's shout reached them over the cries of the rousing Khatkans. But Dane was there first, catching the medic before he slumped to the ground; but he was dragged with that dead weight until he sat with the medic's head on his shoulder, the other's body resting heavily against him. For one horror-filled moment Dane feared that he did indeed hold a dead man, that one of the outlaw Hunters must have struck a last blow for his discredited leader. Then Tau sighed and began to breathe deeply. Dane glanced up, amazed, at the captain.

"He's asleep!"

Jellico knelt and his hand went to test heart beat, then to touch the medic's worn and dirty face. "Best thing for him," he said briskly. "He's had it."

It took some time to get the facts of their triumph sorted out. Two of the off-worlder poachers were dead. The other and the spaceman were prisoners, while Nymani rounded up in addition the man Dane had burned to save Tau. When the younger spaceman returned from making the medic comfortable in the shelter, he found Asaki and Jellico holding an impromptu court of inquiry.

The dazed native Hunters had been expertly looped together by Nymani and, a little apart from them, the off-worlders were under examination.

"An I-C man, eh?" Jellico, smoothing a mud-spattered chin with a grimed hand, regarded the latest arrival measuringly. "Trying to run in and break a Combine charter, were you? You'd better spill the facts; your own head office will disown you, you ought to know that. They never back any failures in these undercover deals."

"I want medical attention," snapped the other, cradling his seared hand to his chest. "Or do you plan to turn me over to these savages?"

"Seeing as how you tried to blast our medic," replied the captain with a grin which was close to shark-like, "he may not feel much like patching up those fingers of yours. Stick 'em in where they have no business, and they're apt to get burned. At any rate he's not going to

look at 'em until he's had a chance to rest. I'll give you first aid. And while I'm working we'll talk. I-C going into the poaching trade now? That news is going to please Combine; they have no use for you boys anyway."

His answer was lurid and uninformative. But the uniform tunic the other wore could not be so easily explained away. Dane, worn out, stretched his aching length on a pile of mats and lost all interest in the argument.

Two days later they stood once more on the same terrace where Lumbrilo had wrought his magic and met his first defeat. This time no lightning played along the mountain ridges and the blaze of the sun was so bright and clear that one could hardly believe in the fantastic happenings of that swamp clearing where men had fought with weapons not made by hands. The three from the Queen moved away from the parapet to meet the Chief Ranger as he came down the stairs.

"A messenger has just arrived. The hunter was hunted indeed, and his going was witnessed by many—though they did not see those which hunted him. Lumbrilo is dead; he came to his end by the Great River."

Jellico started. "But that is almost fifty miles from the swamp, on this side of the mountain!"

"He was hunted and he fled—as you promised," Asaki said to Tau. "You made strong magic, off-world man."

The medic shook his head slowly. "I but turned his own methods against him. Because he believed in his power, that same power, reflected back, broke him. Had I been facing one who did not believe...." He shrugged. "Our first meeting set the pattern. From that moment he feared a little that I could match him, and his uncertainty pierced a hole in his armor."

"Why on earth did you want 'Terra Bound?'" burst out Dane, still seeking an explanation for that one small mystery among the others.

Tau chuckled. "In the first place, that blasted tune has haunted us all for so long that I knew its rhythm was probably the one you could keep to without hardly knowing that you were beating it out. And, in the second place, its alien pattern was a part of our particular background, to counteract Lumbrilo's native Khatkan music, which was certainly a big factor in his stage setting. He must have believed that we would not find out about the drugged water and so would be prepared for any fantasy he cared to produce. When they saw us coming out over the swamp they counted us easy takings. His practice had always been with Khatkans, and he judged us by their reactions to stimuli he knew well how to use. So he failed...."

Asaki smiled. "Which was good for Khatka but ill for Lumbrilo and those using him to make mischief here. The poacher and the outlaw Hunters will meet with our justice, which I do not believe they will relish. But the other two, the spaceman and the company agent, are to be sent to Xecho to face Combine authorities. It is my thought that those will not accept kindly the meddling of another company in their

territory."

Jellico grunted. "Kindness and Combine are widely separated in such matters. But we can now take passage on the same ship as your prisoners—"

"But, my friend, you have not yet seen the preserve. I assure you that this time there shall be no trouble. We have several days yet before you must return to your ship—"

The captain of the Queen held up his hand. "Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to inspect the Zoboru preserve, sir—next year. As it is, my holiday is over and the Queen is waiting for us on Xecho. Also, permit me to send you some tapes dealing with the newest types of flitters—guaranteed against flight failures."

"Yes, guaranteed," Tau added guilelessly, "not to break down, lose course, or otherwise disrupt a pleasant excursion."

The Chief Ranger threw back his head and his deep-chested laughter was echoed from the heights above them. "Very well, Captain. Your mail run will bring you back to Xecho at intervals. Meanwhile I shall study your sales tapes concerning the non-expendable flitters. But you shall visit Zoboru—and pleasantly, very pleasantly, I assure you, Medic Tau!"

"I wonder," Tau muttered and Dane heard. "Just now the quiet of deep space is a far, far more entrancing proposition!"

WORLD OF THE DRONE

Dworn knew that if his machine failed him in battle he would die. For men fought each other viciously, with no bond of brotherhood, in this—World Of The Drone

The beetle woke from a dreamless sleep, yawned, stretched cramped limbs and smiled to himself. In the west the sunset's last glow faded. Stars sprang out in the clear desert sky, dimmed only by the white moon that rose full and brilliant above the eastern horizon.

Methodically, suppressing impatience, he went through every evening's ritual of waking. He checked his instruments, scanned the mirrors which gave him a broad view of moonlit desert to his left. To the right he could see nothing, for his little armored machine lay half-buried, burrowed deep into the sheltering flank of a great dune; all day long it had escaped the notice of prowling diurnal machines of prey. He lis-

tened, too, for any sound of danger which his amplifiers might pick up from near or far.

The motor, idling as it had all day while its master slept, responded to testing with a smooth, almost noiseless surge of power. The instruments were in order; there was plenty of water in the condenser, and though his food supply was low that shouldn't matter—before tonight was done he would be once more among his people.

Only the fuel gauge brought an impatient frown to his face. It was menacingly near the empty mark—which meant he would have to spend time foraging before he could continue his journey. Well ... no help for it. He opened the throttle.

The beetle's name was Dworn, and he was twenty-one years old. The flesh and blood of him, that is. The rest, the steel-armored shell, the wheels and engine and hydraulic power-system, the electric sensory equipment—all of which was to his mind as much part of his identity as his own skin, muscles, eyes and ears—was only five years old.

Dworn's face, under his sleep-tousled thatch of blond hair, was boyish. But there were hard lines of decision there, which the last months had left.... Tonight by the reckoning of his people, he was still a youth; but when tomorrow dawned, the testing of his wanderyear would be behind him, and he would be adult, a warrior of the beetle horde.

Sand spilled from the beetle's dull-black carapace as it surged from its hiding-place. It drifted, its motor only a murmur, along the shoulder of the dune. Dworn eyed his offending fuel gauge darkly; he would very much have liked to be on his way at top speed, toward the year's-end rendezvous of the horde under the shadow of the Barrier.

He began cruising slowly, at random, across the rolling moonlit waste of wind-built dunes, watching for spoor.

He spied, and swerved automatically to avoid, the cunningly concealed pit of a sand devil, strategically placed in a hollow of the ground. Cautiously Dworn circled back for a second look. The conical pit was partly fallen in, unrepaired; the devil was obviously gone.

The burrowing machine would, Dworn knew, have had fuel and other supplies somewhere in its deep lair, buried beneath the drifted sand where it spent its life breathing through a tube to the surface and waiting for unwary passers-by to skid into its trap. But Dworn regretfully concluded that it would not be worth while digging on the chance that whatever had done away with the devil had not rifled its stores.... He swung the beetle's nose about and accelerated again.

On the next rise, he paused to inspect the track of a pill-bug; but to his practiced eye it was quickly evident that the trail was too old, blowing sand had already blurred the mark of heels, and the bug probably was many miles away by now.

A mile farther on, luck smiled on him at last. He crossed the fresh and

well-marked trail of a caterpillar—deeply indented tread-marks, meandering across the dunes.

He began following the spoor, still slowly, so as not to lose it or to run upon its maker unawares. A caterpillar was a lumbering monster of which he had no fear, but it was much bigger than a beetle, and could be dangerous when cornered. Dworn had no wish to corner it; the caterpillar itself was not the object of his stalking, but one of its supply caches which according to caterpillar custom it would have hidden at various places within its range.

The trail led him uphill, into a region cut by washes—dry now, since the rainy season was past—and by ridges that rose like naked vertebrae from the sea of sand that engulfed the valley floor.

Several times Dworn saw places where the caterpillar had halted, backed and filled, shoved piles of earth and rocks together or scraped patches of ground clear with its great shovel. But the beetle knew his prey's habits of old, and he passed by these spots without a second glance, aware that this conspicuous activity was no more than a ruse to deceive predators like himself. If Dworn hadn't known that trick, and many others used by the various non-predatory machine species which manufactured food and fuel by photosynthesis, he would have been unfit to be a beetle—and he would never have lived through the wanderyear which weeded out the unfit according to the beetle people's stern immemorial custom.

At last he came to a stop on a rocky hillside, where the tracks were faint and indistinct. Carefully scanning the ground downslope, he saw that his instinct had not misled him—the caterpillar had turned aside at this place and had afterward returned to its original trail, backing and dragging its digging-blade to obliterate the traces of its side excursion.

Dworn grinned, feeling the stirring of the hunter's excitement that never failed to move him, even on such a prosaic foraging expedition as this. He sent the beetle bumping down the slope.

The blurred trail led into the sandy bed of a wash at the foot of the hill, and along that easily-traveled way for a quarter mile. Then the stream made a sharp bend, undercutting a promontory on the left and creating a high bank of earth and soft white rock. Dworn saw that a section of the bank had collapsed and slid into the gully. That was no accident; the mark where a great blade had sheared into the overhang was plain to read, even if it had not been for the scuffed over vestiges of caterpillar tracks round about.

Dworn halted and listened intently, his amplifier turned all the way up. No sound broke the stillness, and the black moon-shadows within range of his vision did not stir.

He nosed the beetle carefully up to the heap. He had no equipment for moving those tons of soil and rock, but that was no matter. He twisted a knob on the control panel, a shutter in the beetle's forward cowling snapped open and a

telescoping drill thrust from its housing, chattered briefly and took hold, while the engine's pulse strengthened to take up the load.

Twice Dworn abandoned fruitless borings and tried a different spot. On the third try, at almost full extension the drill-point screeched suddenly on metal and then as suddenly met no more resistance. Dworn switched on the pump, and quickly turned it off again; he swung the overhead hatch open, and—pausing to listen warily once more—clambered out onto the cowling, in the cold night air, to open the sample tap at the base of the drill and sniff the colorless fluid that trickled from it.

It gave off the potent odor of good fuel, and Dworn nodded to himself, not regretting his caution though in this case it had not been needed. But—clever caterpillars had been known to bury canisters of water in their caches, poison for the unsuspecting.

The pump throbbed again; there was the satisfying gurgle of fuel flowing into almost-empty tanks. Dworn leaned back, seizing the opportunity to relax for a moment in preparation for the strenuous journey still before him.

But he didn't fail to snap alert when just as the gauge trembled near the full mark, he heard pebbles rattling on the hillside above. Immediately thereupon he became aware of the grind of steel on stone and the rumbling of an imperfectly muffled engine.

In one smooth rapid motion Dworn switched off the pump, and spun the drill control. As the mechanism telescoped back into place, he gunned his engine, and the beetle shot backward and spun round to face the oncoming noise.

A squarish black silhouette loomed high on the slope above the overhanging bank, which rose so steeply that a stone loosened by turning treads bounded with a clang off the beetle's armor in the wash below. The caterpillar halted momentarily, engine grumbling to take in the scene.

Dworn didn't linger to learn its reaction at spying a looter. A snap shot from his turret gun exploded directly in front of the other machine, throwing up a cloud of dust and—he hoped—confusing its crew. And the beetle was fleeing around the bend in the stream bed, keeping close to the high bank.

A score of yards past the turning, intuition of danger made Dworn swerve sharply. An instant later, the ground blew up almost in his face—the bend had brought him into view, under the guns of the enemy above.

He wrenched the beetle around in a skidding turn and raced back for the bend where the overhang afforded shelter. Another shell and another crashed into places he had just left, and then he was safe—for the moment.

But it was an uncomfortable spot. The caterpillar rumbling wrathfully on the slope above him, couldn't see him as long as he hugged the bank, undercut by the water that flowed here in the rainy season; but, by the same token, he couldn't make a dash for safety without running the gauntlet of a murderous fire in the all-too-narrow way the stream bed

offered. In open country, he would not have hesitated to count on his ability to outmaneuver and outshoot the caterpillar ... but here he was neatly trapped.

And it was nerve-racking to be unable to see what the enemy was about. It seemed to have halted, judging the situation just as he had been doing. Now, though, he heard its engine speed up again, and the grinding of its treads came unmistakably closer. His ears strained to gauge its advance as it came lurching down the slope, till it sounded only a few feet away and Dworn braced himself to shoot fast and straight if it started coming down over the bank. Then it paused again, and sat idling, hoping no doubt that he would panic and show himself.

He didn't. The caterpillar's engine raced up once more and began to labor under a heavy load. There was an increasing clatter of falling stones. Then Dworn remembered the great digging-blade it carried, and realized what it was going to try.

Ten feet to his right the bank began giving way. Tons of rubble thundered into the gully. Dworn winced and moved away as far as he dared. He heard the caterpillar back and turn, then it snarled with effort once more and another section of the overhang caved in with a grinding roar.

Inside minutes at this rate, it would either have driven him from his refuge or buried him alive. Now it came rumbling forward for the third time; rocks showered from the rim directly above his head, and he saw the bank begin to tremble.

Dworn braced himself. Even as the wall of earth and rock began leaning outward above him, he gave his engine full throttle. The wheels spun for one sickening instant, then the little machine lunged forward from beneath the fresh landslide and was climbing, bucking and slewing, up the slope of loose soil created by the ones before.

The caterpillar loomed black and enormous on his left hand, so close that it could not have brought its guns to bear even if its crew had expected the beetle to take this daring way out. With its shovel lowered and half-buried, it could not swing round quickly—Dworn had counted on that.

As the beetle's flank cleared the corner of the digging blade with inches to spare, Dworn's gun turret passed in line with the space between the blade and the caterpillar's treads, and he jabbed the firing button. The explosion wreathed the monster's forward half in smoke and dust, and into that cloud it tilted forward, teetered ponderously and then slid headlong to the bottom of the wash as the loosened bank gave way conclusively under its great weight.

Dworn looked back from the hill crest to see it still floundering, treads furiously churning sand, struggling to fight clear of the avalanche it had carried with it. The beetle laughed full-throatedly, without rancor. This hadn't been the first nor the tightest corner he'd been in during the dangerous course of his wanderyear; and in that hard school of life you learned not to

worry about danger already past.

At another time, he might have returned to the battle in hope of capturing the additional supplies the caterpillar carried and—still more valuable booty—the chart it would have, showing the location of its other caches. But now he was in a hurry—this refueling foray had cost him a couple of hours, and the moon was already high.

So he slipped quietly away over the ridge and set his course to the east.

Beyond the hilly land, the terrain ironed out into level alkali flats where a vanished lake had been in the long-gone days when the earth was fertile. There he opened the throttle wide. The plain, white in the moonlight, rolled under the racing wheels at ninety and a hundred miles an hour; air whistled over the carapace....

Impatience surged up in Dworn once more. Eagerly he pictured his forthcoming reunion with his native horde—and with Yold, his father, chief of the horde.

Countless times in the long wanderyear—in moments when death loomed nearer than it had in the brush just past, and he despaired of surviving his testing, or in other moments, yet harder to bear, when the immensity of of the desert earth seemed about to swallow him up in his loneliness—he had grasped at that vision now soon to be real: he, Dworn, stood before the assembled horde, the year of his proving triumphantly completed, and he received before them all the proud, laconic commendation of the chief, his father.

Hungrily he scanned the horizon ahead, saw with leaping heart that it was no longer flat. Along it a black line rose, and grew ragged as it came nearer, and became an endless line of cliffs, marching straight north and south as far as the eye could see.... The Barrier!

Dworn recognized familiar landmarks, and altered his direction a little so as to be heading directly for the year's-end rendezvous. He knew, from childhood memories even, the outline of that vast stone rampart as it appeared by moonlight. Every year the Barrier formed the eastern limit of the beetles' annual migration, as naturally as the shore of the sea was its westward terminus. So it had been for a thousand years or more, as far back as the oldest traditions reached: generation after generation, hunting, foraging, and fighting—from the Barrier to the ocean, from the ocean to the Barrier.

To right and left the serried cliffs stretched out of sight—the edge of the world, so far as beetles knew. If you examined the contour of its rim, you could see how it corresponded point by point to the irregularities of the hilly land on its hither side. Some time, millennia ago, a great fault in the earth's crust had given way, and the unknown lands of the continental interior had been lifted as if on a platform, five hundred feet above the coastal regions. Or perhaps the coast had sunk. Legend attributed the event to the ancients' wars, when, it was said, some unimaginable weapon had cleft the continent asunder....

Dworn perforce slowed his breakneck pace as the ground grew uneven again. He guided his machine with instinctive skill over the ascending slopes and ridges, eyes combing the moonshadows for the first sign of his people.

Then, a couple of miles ahead, he glimpsed lights. His heart bounded up—then sank with a prescient dismay; there was something wrong—

The fires that winked up there—four, no, five of them, under the very rim just before the cliffs rose sheer—didn't look like campfires. They were unequally spaced, and they flared up and waned oddly by turns, glowing evilly red.

Dworn braked the beetle to a stop on a patch of high ground, and sat straining to discern the meaning of those ominous beacons. To his imagination, rasped raw by expectation and the tension of long travel, they became red eyes of menace, warnings.... He tried the infrared viewer, but it showed no more than he could see with the naked eye. Only ghosts paraded across the screen, ghosts of the folded slopes that rose to the abrupt wall of the Barrier. Nothing seemed moving there; the whole sweep of broken and tumbled landscape appeared dead and lifeless as the moon.

But yonder burned the fires.

Sternly Dworn reminded himself that this night he was mature, a warrior of the proud beetle race. He thrust his fears resolutely aside; there was nothing to do but find out.

The beetle drifted forward, but cautiously now, at a stalking pace. Dworn took advantage of the lie of the land, continually seeking cover as he advanced, to shield him from whatever eyes might be watching from the silent slopes above.

Boulders lay ever more thickly strewn as he neared the Barrier cliffs, and he skirted patches of gravel and loose stones that would have crunched loudly under his wheels. Only occasionally, emerging into the open, he glimpsed his objective, but his sense of direction kept him bearing steadily toward the fires.

Fifteen minutes later, the beetle's blunt nose thrusting from under a shelf of rock that would disguise its outline if anything was watching, its motor noiselessly idling, Dworn knew that his premonitions had not been in vain. He looked out upon a scene that chilled his blood.

The burning machines, scattered for two hundred yards along the talus slope where destruction had come upon them or where they had plunged out of control, were beetles. Or they had been. Now they were wrecks, smashed, overturned, fitfully aflame.

There was no sign of an enemy. But here was the havoc which some powerful enemy had wrought, it could not have been long ago.

He strove to find identifying marks on the blackened hulks, but in the uncertain light could make out at first no more than the female ornaments which had graced two or three of them. Names and faces flashed through Dworn's

mind; he could not know yet who had perished here, which faces he would not see again....

It hardly occurred to him to speculate that anyone might be left alive on the scene of the debacle. For one thing, the destruction's thoroughness was too evident, and besides, in Dworn's mind, by all his background and his teaching, human and machine were inextricably one; when one perished, so did the other....

There was a dull explosion, a shower of sparks and a spreading glare as a fuel tank blew up. The flare revealed the pillar of smoke, blood-colored by reflection, that towered into the night above the scene. And it revealed more. For Dworn saw by that unholy light that one of the nearer beetles—capsized and burned out, its carapace burst raggedly open—it bore the golden scarab emblem which was the chief's alone.

The sight smote Dworn like a physical blow, so that he almost cried out aloud. Somehow it had not even crossed his mind that his father Yold could have been among the slain in whatever disaster had fallen upon the beetles here.... Others might die; but his father was a pillar of strength that could not fall—the grave iron-willed chief, demanding and rewarding, for his son impartially as for all the people....

Dworn's breath choked in his throat and his eyes stung. Fiercely he told himself that a beetle, a chief's son, did not weep.

Not to mourn—to revenge, that was his duty. By the law of his people, the bereaved son must seek out and slay not less than three members of whatever race had done his father to death. Until then, his father's insatiate spirit would roam the deserts without rest....

But Dworn did not even know as yet who had done this night's work.

Suddenly, by the new blaze that still continued, he saw movement, a dull sheen of metal moving, and he froze the gesture that had been about to send him forward into the arena of death.

The infrared was useless; by it the flickering firelight was blinding. Dworn bit his lip in anger at his own lack of precaution, and hastily twisted his sound-receptor control to maximum. The crackling of the flames swelled to a hissing roar, but through it he heard the unmistakable creaking sound of treads. Beyond the smoke moved an indistinct and monstrous shape.

Dworn's jaw muscles set rock-hard and his hand flashed to another control. His turret gun revolved soundlessly, and the crosshairs of the sight danced across the mirrored image of the approaching thing. His finger poised over the firing button, he braced himself to fling his machine into swift evasive action before the enemy's perhaps overwhelming firepower could reply—

The monster lumbered slowly into the light, canted far over and traveling with an odd sidling motion along the steep rubbly slope. Great treads set far out on each side of the squat, ungainly body preserved it against overturning. Its flattened forward turret swiveled

nervously from side to side, peering blackly from vision ports steel-shuttered down to squinting slits.

And Dworn relaxed. The red hatred that had blazed up in him subsided into mere disgust; he watched the great machine's wary progress with a familiar, instinctive contempt. It was a scavenger, huge but not very formidable, drawn from afar by the fires which promised loot, salvageable scrap, perhaps even usable parts, fuel or ammunition.... It could not possibly have been responsible for the carnage; such cowardly creatures gave a wide berth to the beetle horde.

The monster ground to a halt amid the wreckage. Then its engine bellowed with sudden power and it spun half round, one tread spraying gravel, and backed hastily away up the slope. And Dworn was aware that the noise of creaking treads had redoubled. He cast about, and saw, laboring upward from below, another big machine, closely similar to the first.

Both scavengers came to a stop, facing one another across the fading of the fires, their unmuffled engines grumbling sullenly. Dworn watched them narrowly, expecting the shooting to begin any moment. But the scavengers' way of life was not one that encouraged reckless valor. After a long minute, a hatch-cover was lifted in the first arrival's armored back; a cautious head thrust forth, and shouted hoarsely, words clear to Dworn's amplified hearing:

"Better go back where you came from, brother. We got here first!" The other scavenger's turret-hatch also swung slightly open. A different voice answered: "Don't talk foolishness, brother. We've got as much right here as you, and anyway we saw it first!" The first voice thickened with belligerence. "We've got the advantage of the ground on you, brother. Better back up!" "Oh, go smelt pebbles!" snarled the other. No doubt that was a scathing rejoinder among the scavengers.

Dworn grimaced scornfully and brought his turret-gun to bear on an outcropping midway between the disputants. Either of them outweighed the little beetle twenty times over—but at this juncture a single unexpected shot would probably send both of them scuttling for cover—

But he halted again on the verge of firing. For he had not stopped listening, and now his trained ears picked out another, an unfamiliar sound from the background of noises.

It was a queer rattle and scurry, mingled with a high-pitched buzz that could only come from a number of small but high-speed motors. It was not a sound the exact like of which Dworn remembered having heard before. He went rigid, staring, as the sound's source came into view.

A column of little machines—lighter even than a beetle, and more elongated—advancing in single file, multiple wheels swerving in the leader's tracks as the column wound nearer along the mountainside. As the firelight fell on them they gleamed with the mild

sheen of aluminum. Round vision-ports stared glassily, and turbines buzzed feverishly shrill.

With astonishing bravado, the flimsy little vehicles, one behind another, came parading onto the wreck-strewn slope.

And what was more startling still—no two of them were alike. The leader mounted a winch in plain view; behind came another machine fitted with oddly-shaped grappling claws, and next one bearing a mysterious device terminating in front in a sort of flexible trunk.... Strangely, too, they didn't seem to carry any armament—no snouting guns, no flame or gas projectors.

Despite that fact or perhaps because of it, something sounded an alarm deep in Dworn's mind.

Their diversity itself was uncanny, that was certain. In all Dworn's experience, machines were the work of races whose traditions of construction, handed down from forgotten antiquity, were as fixed and unvarying as the biological heredity that made one race light-haired, another dark....

A hatch-cover clanged shut, and another. The squabbling scavengers had finally noticed the appearance of outside competition. The one upslope raced its engine uncertainly, swung round to face the buzzing invaders, hesitated.

The newcomers, for their part, seemed oblivious to the scavengers' presence. Their column began dispersing. A grapple-armed machine laid hold on one of the wrecked beetles and, whining with effort, sought to drag it to leveler ground. A second, following, spat a burst of sparks and extended a gleaming arm tipped by the singing blue radiance of a cutting torch.

The first-come scavenger growled throatily and lumbered toward the interlopers, plainly taking heart from their air of harmless stupidity. Behind it, the other scavenger came clattering up the slope to its fellow's aid.

Flame bloomed thunderously from the muzzle of the first one's forward gun. The machine with the torch was flung bodily into the air and went rolling and bouncing down the hill, wheels futilely spinning. The gun roared again, and the exploding shell tore open a flimsy aluminum body from nose to tail. Motors whirred frantically as the pygmies scattered before the charging behemoth. One of them darted witlessly right under the huge treads, and disappeared with a brief screech of crumpling metal.

The fight was over as quickly as it had begun. The scavenger wheeled, snorting, and fired one more shot into the dark after its routed opponents....

Dworn muttered an imprecation under his breath. No chance of frightening the scavengers off now that their blood was up and their differences forgotten; and a lone beetle could scarcely stand up to two of them in a knock down fight. To rush in now would be suicidal.

He gave up the idea of investigating the scene of disaster more closely, and backed stealthily away, keeping to the cover of the rocks. At a safe distance he began circling round, downslope.

What he could and must do now was to locate what was left of his native horde. It had numbered about fifty when he had departed for his wanderyear; a dozen, perhaps more, had died on the mountain tonight. He must seek out the survivors, and help plan retaliation against whatever enemy had dealt them this terrible blow.

Yet something else nagged at his mind, until he halted to gaze achingly once more toward the glowing embers up there, where the scavengers now clanked to and fro about their business.

Dworn recognized that what bothered him was the puzzle of the unidentified little machines that had turned up on the battlefield only to be sent packing. During his yearlong solitary struggle to survive, he had developed an extra sense or two—and in the queerly confident behavior of those buzzing strangers he had scented danger, a trap....

So it happened that he was still looking on at the moment when the trap was sprung.

A star, it seemed, fell almost vertically from the zenith, falling and expanding with the uncanny silence of flight faster than sound. The scavengers had no time to act. Dworn caught one faint glimpse of a winged shape against the sky, limned by the flashes that stabbed from it as it leveled out of its terrific dive.

One scavenger shuddered with the force of a heavy explosion somewhere within it, and subsided, smoking. The other too staggered under crippling impacts, but ground somehow into motion, spinning and sliding crazily down the gravel slope. Then, as the first attacker's shock-wave made the very earth tremble, a second and a third plunged from the black heights, and as the last one rose screeching from its swoop the whole lower face of the hillside boomed into a holocaust of flame and oily smoke. The fleeing scavenger was gone, enveloped somewhere in an acre of fiery hell.

Dworn, two hundred yards away, felt a searing breath of heat, and with a great effort controlled the impulse to whirl round and race for opener ground. He sat still, hands cramped sweating on the beetle's controls, while the sky whistled vindictively with the flight of things that circled in search of further targets.

When, after a seeming eon, their screaming died away, he released held breath in a long sigh. He found himself trembling with reaction. Still he didn't stir. He was ransacking his memory for something he should be able to recall but which eluded him—a myth, perhaps, heard as a child beside the campfires of the horde—

The old men would know; Yold would have known. At thought of his father, the grief and fury rose up again in Dworn, and this time he knew the object of his vengeful anger. There was small doubt now in his mind that those flying machines which struck so swiftly and so murderously had been the beetles' attackers.

But he didn't know what they were.

He knew, of course, about the machines called hornets, which could fly and strike at fearful speeds like that, outracing sound. But the hornets flew only in daylight, and made no trouble for the nocturnal race of beetles. These—were something else.

And more—between the deadly night-fliers and the harmless-looking aluminum crawlers he had seen, Dworn sensed some connection, some unnatured symbiosis. He had heard vague rumors about such arrangements, but had half-discounted them; any of the peoples whom he knew at first hand would have scorned to enter into alliance with an alien species.

Lastly, he realized bitterly, he didn't even know where the enemy's lair, their base on the ground, might be....

* * * * *

The moon stood high now. But the Barrier, close at hand now, rose like an immense black wall, folded in shadows, revealing no secrets—walling off the world the beetles knew from the unknown beyond. Involuntarily Dworn shivered. He couldn't be sure—but it seemed to him that the destroyers had come from over the Barrier and had flown back there.

He set his machine in cautious motion again and stole along, making northward and keeping close to the Barrier. It occurred to him that the beetle horde, routed and fleeing, might well have hugged the cliffs for protection against flying foes.

The going here was not easy. The terrain seemed increasingly unfamiliar though he should have known every foot of it. But—he remembered no such tumbled crags, no such great heaps of stony detritus as blocked his way and forced him into long detours....

Finally he halted to take his bearings, and, looking up, discovered what had happened. The black rampart of the Barrier was notched and broken. Sometime in the past year, since Dworn had left this place to begin his wandering, a quarter-mile-wide section of the upper crags, hollowed and loosened by the slow working of millennial erosion, had fallen and spilled millions of tons of rock crashing and shattering onto the slopes below. Here now water would run when the rains fell, and in ten or twenty thousand years, perhaps, a river-course would have completed the breach.

Dworn wondered fleetingly whether any living thing had been here when the cliffs fell. If so, it was buried now, crumbling bone and corroding metal, under the mountain for all time to come.

He set about skirting the rockfall, still searching the ground for traces of beetle wheels. But there were very few wheel or tread marks of any description to be seen—and that was strange in itself.

Impulsively he halted again and listened, his amplifier turned up. He should have heard faroff engine-mutterings, occasional explosions from the desert to the west, where normally the predatory machines and their victims prowled and fought all night long over the sandy tracts and the desolate

ridges.... But there was nothing. A silence, vast and unnatural, lay upon the wastes in the shadow of the high plateau.

He looked up again at the fallen rampart of the Barrier. The great landship had opened, as it were, a gateway to the unknown lands in the east—a gateway for what?

There was a strangeness here since last year, and the strangeness crept chillingly into Dworn's blood, made the mountain air seem thin and cold.

As he started again, he noticed yet another curious thing. He was crossing a sandy natural terrace, and the soft soil here was traversed by a row of indented marks that marched in a straight line across the open space. They were scuffed depressions, such as a ricocheting projectile might have made—but oddly regular in shape and spacing, almost, he thought fancifully, like giant footprints, ten feet apart....

Dworn was growing numbed to riddles. He shrugged impatiently and pressed the accelerator again.

He would push on northward for a few more miles, he determined, and if he still found no sign of his people, he would circle back to the south....

The moonlight shadow of the huge tilted boulder ahead was inky. But Dworn was keeping to the shadows by preference, remembering the death from above; so he cut close around the overhanging rock.

Too late to swerve, then, he saw the gleam of something stretched across his path. A metallic glint of deceptively slender strands which, as the beetle rolled headlong into them, snapped taut without breaking, sprang back and flipped the beetle clean over to fetch up against the rock with an ear-shattering bang.

Half-stunned by the suddenness of it and the violence with which he had been flung about, Dworn blurrily saw other cables settling from overhead, coiling almost like living things around his overturned machine. Then he glimpsed something else; stalking monstrously down from the unscalable crag above, its armor glimmering in the moonlight, a machine such as he had never imagined—a machine without wheels or treads, a nightmare moving on jointed steel legs that flexed and found holds for clawed steel feet with the smooth precision of well-oiled pistons. A machine that walked.

Capsized, its vulnerable underside exposed, the beetle was all but helpless. One hope remained. With wooden fingers Dworn groped for the emergency button, found it—

The propellant-charge went off beneath him with a deafening roar. The beetle was hurled upward and sidewise, in an arc that should have brought it down on its wheels again—but the ensnaring cables tightened and held, and Dworn's head slammed against something inside the cabin. The world burst apart into a shower of lights and darkness....

Dworn came awake to a pounding head and blurred light in his eyes. He moved, and sensed that he was bound.

His vision cleared. He saw that he was in a closed, half-darkened chamber—and that discovery alone made him shudder, he who as a free beetle had spent his whole life under desert skies. His feet rested on a floor of hard-packed sand, and his back, behind which his wrists were lashed together was propped uncomfortably against a wall ribbed with metal girders. The room was circular and its walls converged upward, into tangled shadows overhead; the chamber was roughly bottle-shaped.

To one side a door stood ajar, and it was thence that the light streamed, but from where he was Dworn couldn't see into the space beyond.

He tried hard to collect his thoughts. When had everything stopped making sense? When he had first glimpsed the fires that were burning beetles on the mountainside, or....

The converging lines of the wall-girders led his eyes upward. The shadows overhead resolved themselves as he studied them, and Dworn's heart pounded as he commenced to understand what manner of place he was in. The roof of the bottle-shaped chamber—he was sure it must be underground—was no roof, but was the underside of a great machine complex with gear-housings and levers connected with the six powerful metal legs radiating from it, their cleated feet resting on a shelf that encircled the bottleneck. It squatted there, motionless above him, sealing the entrance to its burrow....

Trapped. For some reason he couldn't guess at, he had been taken alive—his human body, at least; he didn't know what had become of the rest of him, the machine that was part and parcel of him too.

The light suddenly brightened. The door at one side was swinging open.

Dworn blinked at the glare from the lighted room beyond. Against it a figure stood in silhouette, and he saw that it was a woman.

She was slender, not very tall, and her hair was jet-black, a striking frame for a startlingly pale face. Here beneath the earth she must not get much sun.... In that white face her lips were shockingly red, the color of fresh blood. And the nails of her slim white fingers were crimson claws. After a moment, he realized that both must be painted—a strange thing to him, for there was no such practice among beetle women.

She was clad in a coverall suit of much the same design as the green garment Dworn wore according to beetle custom. But her garb was shiny black, and in front, between the swelling mounds of her breasts, was an emblem he did not understand; the shape of an hourglass, in vermilion red.

She stood gazing at him, smiling a little with a curve of scarlet lips that revealed white, sharp-looking teeth. Dworn groped for his voice; but she spoke first.

"Patience, beetle," she said. "I'll attend to you in a moment."

The words had the accent of a strange speech, but they were intelli-

gible. Dworn stared uncomprehendingly at her, mumbled, "Who—what are you?"

She moved nearer and stood smiling down at him. "Why, beetle, don't you know?... I'm the spider who caught you."

"Spi-der?" Dworn fumbled with the unfamiliar word. "I don't—"

Her eyes too were black, very black and intense. She said slowly, "You don't know about spiders, beetle? Strange. It must be that till now there were none of our kind on this side of the Rim."

Dworn's aching head was not serving him well, but a part of his intelligence functioned to grapple with the implication of her words. "The Rim"—that must mean the Barrier, as seen from its eastern side. Then she, and others like her, must have come from beyond the Barrier. A walking machine could descend by the broken path of the landslide.

But "spider"—the word rang some bell deep in his mind, some recollection of childhood's fairytale bogeys perhaps, but he still hadn't succeeded in grasping the memory.

He growled, "I don't know—but if you'd untie my hands, I'd show you what a beetle is."

She eyed him thoughtfully. Then she smiled, showing the sharp little white teeth again. "Presently I'll free you. When it's quite safe. As soon as—" Her hand dipped to a small black case secured to her belt, and came up with a diminutive gleaming object—a slender needle thrusting from a liquid-filled plastic cylinder fitted with a plunger. "Do you know what this is, beetle?"

Dworn glowered silently.

"When I've injected this fluid into your veins, you will have no will of your own left. You'll do what I say, and only what I say—for the rest of your life, beetle!"

Dworn's eyes clung in unwilling fascination to the glittering needle. He said through stiff lips, "Now I remember. Your kind is a legend among my people. The evil women who have no men ... who kill their male children at birth, and trap their mates from among the other races, and kill them, too, when they no longer want them.... Spider! "

His gaze collided squarely with hers, and she needed no skill to read the loathing in it, rendered more violent by her beauty that he could not help but see.

Her eyes dropped first. She clutched the needle and muttered fiercely to herself, "But when you've had the injection, it won't matter. I'll say, 'Love me!' and you'll love me, and 'Die!' and you'll die...."

Dworn stared burningly at the slim figure in black with the scarlet hourglass on her bosom. He was alert again, and his mind was racing. To all appearances he was lost—but something in the spider girl's manner gave him an unreasonable hope.

He said abruptly, "So. Why didn't you use your poison while I was stunned? That would have been easy."

She looked away. "You ask foolish questions, beetle. Naturally, I had to

prepare myself according to our customs. I had to paint my face and make myself beautiful...."

He said inspiredly, "You are beautiful."

Her reaction was surprising. She stood gazing raptly at him, lips slightly parted the hypodermic forgotten in her hand. Dworn sensed that had he been unbound, he would have had no trouble overpowering her.

She whispered, "It's true, then!"

And he realized forcibly how young she was—the painted lips made her look much older, and the shadows—which he now saw were also painted on—beneath her eyes. Only a girl, and if she had been one of his own people he would have looked at her twice and more than twice.... But above their heads the great spider-machine's underparts gleamed dully, straddling the sunken den. And the spell lasted only a moment. The girl straightened her shoulders and took a deep breath. "Why am I talking to a beetle? It's time..."

There was a clang of metal from somewhere in the room beyond. The girl's face reflected sudden fright, beneath its painted mask. She spun round and took two steps toward the inner door, but even as she did so, the door swung wide, and dark figures crowded through it.

The girl cried, with terror and anger in her voice, "What do you mean, coming into my Nest like this? You have no right—"

The interlopers were three in number, and all of them were women, wearing black garments like the girl's, with the red spider symbol on the breast. The one in the lead was elderly, her hair wisped with gray, and her face was lined by years and passions; her eyes were flinty, her mouth thin and cruel. The other two were younger; one was a strapping blonde wench taller than Dworn, who moved with a powerful and formidable grace; the other was short, soft-looking, with a child's pouting mouth and a queer, mad glint in her dark eyes.

The older woman said, "No right? You've had your own Nest for all of three months now, dear Qanya, and already you tell your Mother that she has no right to enter?"

The girl quailed. She retreated step by step until her back was against the wall beside Dworn, and met the old woman's eyes with a look half fright, half defiance.

"But, of course, you have your reasons," the Spider Mother went on bitingly. Her hard eyes stabbed at the bound and helpless Dworn. "Somewhere you managed to catch this, and bring him in without letting anyone know, and paint your face and prepare the needle.... You chose to forget that in times like these there are others of the Family whose claim to a mate has priority over yours!"

"That's true, Mother!" said the tall blonde energetically. The plump girl licked her full lips and said nothing.

"Quiet, Purri!" snapped the Spider Mother. Her eyes raked the girl Qanya

again. "Well, and what do you have to say for yourself?"

Qanya's black eyes flashed. "I caught him myself," she blazed. "You've no right—"

"No right, no right," mocked the old woman. "Why, I believe that, if you'd dared, you'd have blocked up the connecting tunnel so we couldn't walk in on you. Who has rights is for me to decide—and for me to decide whether you're whipped and sent back to the young girls' dormitory. Until I've made up my mind—" She turned and frowned thoughtfully at her two companions, jabbed a finger at the tall one. "You, Purri, stay here and see that nothing happens to the catch, and make sure our little Qanya doesn't misbehave. I'm going to my Nest and check over the Family ledger, to settle the question of who's first in line for a mate. We've got to be strict, now that the cursed night-fliers are everywhere and it's been so long since we trapped a presentable male." She eyed Dworn once more, and smiled thinly. "He's a fine youth. Who knows? I might even take him for myself."

Dworn had no stomach for the compliment. Secretly, he was twisting his bound hands behind him, trying to loosen the knots. Those knots had been none too skillfully tied, and given time.... But he had to desist as the tall Purri strode near and stood over him. She cast a glance after the retreating backs of the Spider Mother and her other proteges, then devoted all her attention to Dworn, surveying him in critical silence and with a business-like eye for detail.

Qanya huddled against the wall; her dark eyes were enormous, and tears had streaked the make-up on her cheeks.

Purri nodded satisfiedly. "He'll do," she said matter-of-factly to Qanya. "The Mother should give him to me. It's a choice between me and Marza, really—" She jerked her head toward the door through which the dark, pouting girl had gone—"But Marza doesn't really appreciate a mate. All she cares about is seeing how long she can take to make them die."

Qanya stared hotly at her. She said in a stifled voice, "You're a beast, and Marza is a beast, and—" "Careful!" said Purri lazily. "If you say anything against the Mother, I'll have to report you." Arms akimbo, she looked scornfully down at the younger girl's tearful face.

Dworn had been right about the knots Qanya had tied. They were slipping. He wrestled in silence, hoping for a little more time.... Then he was sickeningly aware that Qanya was looking toward him, had seen what he was doing. For an instant he froze.

Qanya said hurriedly, "Anyway, you're a beast, Purri. A greedy one. You've had two mates already—why didn't you make them last? And I've not even had one."

"When you're older," said Purri loftily, her back still turned to the struggling beetle, "you'll understand more. But you ought to know from your schooling that there are some races that mate for life—and among them, the males dominate the female. We spiders are

above such degrading practices."

Qanya's eyes flicked momentarily to Dworn, who was wrenching at the final knot. "Yes, yes, I know," she said. "But I still say it isn't fair—"

Dworn came catlike to his feet, ignoring the pain of cramped limbs. The cord with which he had been bound was looped in his hands. With a single stride he was upon the unwarned Purri; one hand clamped over her mouth, cutting off outcry, and the other hand whipped the cord tight around her. She fought with the strength of a man, but futilely. Dworn ripped a length of fabric from her clothing and improvised a gag; when he was done, the spider woman could do no more than kick and gurgle a little.

During the brief struggle, Qanya had watched without making a sound, hands pressed against the girdered wall at her back. As Dworn faced her now, breathing hard, he saw fear written large in her face.

She whispered, "Beetle, you won't hurt me?"

Dworn hesitated briefly. There was no doubt she had helped him—if only out of jealousy of the others. But at the same time she was a spider, a natural enemy. And time was desperately vital. In a flash of inspiration, he saw that there was one way to make sure of his escape.

"If you're quiet," he promised, "I won't hurt you. Not much, anyway." Then his arm was about her, pinioning her, while his free hand snaked to her waist and plucked the hypodermic from its case. For a moment she struggled and even tried to bite him, as she saw what he was about to do. Then, clumsily but effectively, he had stabbed the needle into her upper arm and pressed the plunger home.

He felt her stiffen and then relax, shivering, as the drug coursed through her blood. He released her and stepped back, watching her warily.

"How do you like your own medicine, spider?" he demanded harshly.

The girl stood motionless. Her black eyes, fixed on him, seemed to dull as if with sleep.

"Do you hear me?"

"Yes," she said tonelessly.

"Do you obey me if I give you orders?"

"Yes."

Dworn grinned exultantly. It had worked—But there was no time to lose. The Spider Mother might return any moment.

"Where is my machine?"

She answered without expression, "I left it where it was. I didn't want it, I was only seeking a mate."

Dworn sighed with heartfelt relief. He looked upward, toward the spider-machine overhead: "All right. I command you to take me back to the place where you left my beetle."

Qanya turned silently toward a slender steel ladder that rose to the belly of the crouching metal monster. Dworn followed her, his nerves still strung close to the snapping point, but with hope leaping in him.... On the floor, the trussed-up Purri stared up with round eyes and made smothered

noises.

They clambered into the spider through a port in its underside, past the engines and the great drums of steel cable which served to snare the spider's prey. The space within was cramped, barely big enough to hold two, and its instruments and controls were bewilderingly strange to Dworn. The tangle of switches and levers that must govern the mechanical legs made no sense at all to him, and he felt a moment of near-panic: if the hypnotic injection's magic should fail, he would be quite helpless here.

Braving it out, he snapped, "Make it go!"

Obediently Qanya touched this and that control. The spider's engine throbbed with power, and its legs straightened, lifting it so quickly as to cause a sinking sensation in the stomach. From overhead came a creaking, and a band of light appeared and widened, grew dazzling as a circular trapdoor opened on daylight.

Dworn caught his breath. He hadn't reckoned with its being daytime; evidently he had been unconscious longer than he had supposed. But he couldn't worry about that.

"Go on!" he rasped. "Outside!"

The machine clambered stiffly out of its burrow; sand crunched under its steel feet. Blinking at the sun, Dworn saw that the trap opened on a stretch of boulder-strewn wasteland; it must not be far from the foot of the great slide. The trapdoor was coated with sand to make it appear only a half-buried rock, and in the near distance were other, closely similar outcroppings that were very likely the entrances to other spiders' burrows.

"Get us away from here! Quick!" ordered Dworn shakily.

Still wordlessly, her face smooth and mask-like, the girl set the walking machine in motion. It moved with a queer rolling gait which made Dworn dizzy, though it stilted over the irregularities of the ground with scarcely a jar. Dworn felt nakedly exposed, riding high above the ground in broad daylight, but he gritted his teeth and tried not to think of the probability of attack by some day-faring marauder. He supposed the spider girl, accustomed likewise to a nocturnal life, would have felt the same fear of the light, if she hadn't been hypnotized.

Under the drug's influence she apparently couldn't speak unless spoken to. However, there were questions he wanted to ask her.

First—"What do you know about the attack on the beetles last night?"

"I know there was a battle," said Qanya flatly, without looking up from the controls. "I didn't see it, but the Mother and some others were prowling at the time, and saw. It was the flying things, which have given us too so much trouble."

That, if true—and he judged that it must be true—confirmed his prior suspicion, and killed another suspicion he had entertained for a little while—that the spiders themselves might have been the ambushers. He demanded,

"What do you know about those night-fliers?"

"Very little. We do not know just what they are or where they came from. They began appearing hereabouts only four months ago, which was three months after the Rim collapsed and the Mother decided that we should descend and try the hunting on this side. Since then they've grown more and more numerous. They fly by day as well as by night, and attack everything that moves. They've taken several of our Family, and I think they've made heavy depredations on the peoples that inhabit this region. We spiders would have abandoned the location before now, but we feared to be caught migrating in the open...."

Dworn gazed apprehensively out at the glaring desert that was rolling past the spider windows. The news that the aerial killers also operated by day was most unwelcome. But as yet there was no sign of an enemy.

He said, "The little ground machines—unarmored, made of aluminum. They're allied in some way to the flying ones, aren't they?"

"We think so. Wherever the flying machines have made a kill, the crawlers appear before long to carry away the spoils. And if they're attacked—the fliers come swooping down within minutes to defend or avenge them. So most of the other inhabitants have learned to leave the crawlers alone; it's extremely dangerous to meddle with them."

Dworn could confirm that fact from his own observation.

Evidently the spider folk, even though they came from beyond the Barrier as the mysterious others apparently had too, knew little more than he himself had already discovered. But—there was one more question.

"Do you know," he asked tensely, "where these strangers' home base is? Where do they fly from?"

The girl looked doubtful. "We're sure only that it's somewhere beyond the Rim, where we used to live."

That much, too, he had guessed. Dworn subsided into glum silence, as Qanya impassively guided the machine on its way, covering distance at a surprising speed.

Then, even by the unaccustomed daylight, Dworn recognized first one landmark and then another, and knew they were approaching the spot where he had been trapped last night. A weird return, riding as master in the monstrous machine that had snared him!

As the great tilted rock hove in view, Dworn strained for the first glimpse of his abandoned vehicle. When he saw it, lying still overturned in the shadow of the boulder, he sighed in relief. Its door was ajar, where Qanya must have dragged him stunned from the machine last night ... but it appeared unscathed. The fear at the back of his mind, that scavengers might have happened on it—in which case they would have had it dismantled and carried away by now—was happily unrealized. For that he perhaps had partly to thank the enemy against whom he had sworn vengeance, the flying fiends who had deci-

mated and terrorized the peoples native to this land....

"All right," he ordered. "Stop here!"

The walking machine crunched to a halt, standing almost over the beetle. Dworn looked at the spider girl, then, in irresolution.

In the pitiless daylight she was still piquantly beautiful, though her pale face was still smudged with the remnants of her ceremonial make-up and her eyes were veiled, withdrawn. Yes, she was even desirable.... Dworn put that thought determinedly out of his head. After all, she was an alien and an enemy; she had sought to make a doomed slave of him.

But now that her usefulness to him was over, he didn't know just what to do about her. The sensible thing would be, of course, simply to kill her. Somehow he felt that he couldn't do that. It was one thing to kill in the impersonal fury of machine combat, a different matter when the victim was helpless within your reach.... And he remembered that she had helped him escape.

He could command her to return to her people, to the tender mercies of the Spider Mother—who would know by now of Qanya's part in Dworn's disappearance. Damn it, that would probably be worse than killing her in cold blood! He was wasting time. Angry at himself for his unbeetlelike softness, Dworn postponed deciding what to do with her till he should have inspected his machine and made sure it was in shape to travel.

"Come along," he told the girl gruffly. "Outside."

Once more she obeyed unprotesting. The two clambered out of the belly of the standing spider—Qanya staring before her with sleepwalking fixity, Dworn nervously scanning sky and horizon for hostile machines. The sunlit waste was terrifyingly immense bright, and empty. With a physical ache of yearning he longed for the cramped security of his own machine's cabin.

He brushed past the girl and ran toward the upside-down beetle—he could easily right it with a spare emergency cartridge, and then he would be on his way in a normal world again—He stopped short with one hand on the beetle's dull-black steel flank. The world seemed to rock around him.

The girl watched him without expression as his face went slack with horror, as he completed his arrested movement and dived into the cabin to confirm the dreadful discovery that first touch had disclosed to him.

When Dworn climbed out he was white and shaking. He took a few steps away from the beetle and sank weakly down on the sunwarmed sand.

"What's the matter?" asked Qanya.

He turned and looked dully at her. He had completely forgotten that she was there.

He said listlessly, "I'm dead."

"Of course you're dead." Her brows puckered faintly as she gazed at him. "Naturally, I drained your fuel tanks last night—"

Dworn surged to his feet and took

one step toward her, fists knotted, blown by a gust of fury. She stared levelly back at him, unflinching—and he halted, shoulders drooping. "Ah, what's the use?"

He should have foreseen this—not that it would have done any good if he had. The beetle's fuel supply had been drunk up by the spider now towering over them; and the beetle's engine, even idling at minimum consumption, had used up what little remained in the system, and had stopped. And it was as if Dworn's own lifeblood had been drained and his own heart had stopped beating.

Qanya was still watching him blankly. She said, "Can't you start it again?"

Dworn was jolted by the realization that she genuinely didn't understand that he was dead—that there was no way of restarting an engine once stopped. Until now he had supposed that all races were the same in that respect; but evidently spiders were different. In fact, now he remembered that, when they had entered the spider-vehicle, the girl had pushed a button that apparently started the engine. Spiders, then, died and came to life again every day—a startling notion.

But the beetles—Among the thoughts that tumbled disjointedly through Dworn's head in this awful moment was a clear vision of the night, five years ago, when his machine-existence had begun: when, in the horde's encampment by the sea a thousand miles from here, the beetle's last seam had been welded, and its engine set going with the appropriate ritual of birth.... The sixteen-year-old boy's heart had beaten high and proudly, in tune with the heart of steel and fire that had begun to throb at that moment. And the life expectancy of the two was measured with the same measure, the life of flesh and that of metal indissolubly entwined....

He mumbled dazedly, "I'm dead, do you hear? Dead!"

There was a sudden howling in the sky. Flashing overhead, as the two stood momentarily petrified, went a shrieking flight of half a dozen winged shapes—stubby vanes slanting back from vicious noses, they hurtled low over the desert and vanished swiftly into the distance, dust-devils dancing across the ground in the whirling wind of their passage.

Dworn stared after them, and his eyes narrowed. A new and desperate resolve had begun shaping itself in his mind.

Of the things he had meant to do in life, it was no use thinking any more of rejoining his people. He was dead to them, for sure—not even a beetle any more, but only what was left of one, a ghost.... But a holy duty, stronger than death, remained to him; his father was still unrevenged.

What he could do against a foe so powerful as those who had just passed over, he had no idea—but perhaps a ghost could accomplish what a living man might well deem impossible.

He motioned Qanya peremptorily toward the waiting spider-machine.

"Come on. We're taking your machine, and we're going to find them!" For a moment she seemed to hesitate ... then she obeyed. If her face was paler than usual, Dworn failed to notice it.

The spider-vehicle lurched and swayed, even its marvelous system of shock-absorbers protesting as it climbed steeply, straddling upward from rock to rock.

Dworn clutched at handholds inside the pitching cabin and tried to combat the sympathetic lurching of his stomach. Qanya huddled tensely over the controls, slim hands flashing nimbly to and fro as with incredible deftness she guided the laboring machine.

Dworn risked a glimpse from the turret-windows, then shut his eyes with a rush of giddiness. They were climbing now up the steepest part of the great slide, where the mountainside had collapsed in a chaos of splintered rock and tumbled crags that would have been utterly impassible for any wheeled vehicle. Below them, the sloping valley floor they had left appeared from this height entirely flat and sickeningly far away. And still the cliff-heads frowning above them seemed terribly remote.

"How ... far?" gasped Dworn.

"It can't be very far now to the top," said Qanya, without glancing up from her absorbed concentration. Both their lives were in her hands; a slip, a misstep, and they might fall hundreds of feet among the jagged rocks to their death.

For seconds at a time, the walking machine poised motionless, one or more of its clawed limbs groping for footholds. As it clambered painfully upward, it was hopelessly exposed to attack if it should be sighted from the air.

Dworn, the beetle told himself savagely, you are not only a ghost, you are an insane ghost. Only a madman would have undertaken such a journey.

The cabin heeled wildly as the machine grappled a ledge and, its engine panting at full throttle, levered itself upward a few more feet.

He had commanded the spider girl to find the route by which her people had descended. But twice already they had missed the way and had arrived at dead ends beyond which it was impossible to climb higher; twice they had been forced to descend and search for an easier path. It had been scarcely noon when they started; now the sun was already sinking low.

Dworn could not even be sure that he would find his sworn enemies beyond the Barrier. But the duty of vengeance was all he had left to live for, since what was to have been his triumphal return had ended in bereavement and catastrophe.

And a dead man, thought Dworn bleakly, needs something to live for, even more than other people do.

The world came level again, for the moment. The machine sidled precariously along a narrow ledge girdling an unscalable wall of rock, as Qanya sought a spot to resume the ascent. Dworn winced at the thought that the way might be blocked again. But, no—fifty yards further on, the wall was

breached, and toppled boulders formed a perilous but not impossible stairway.

Just as Qanya grasped the levers which would set the spider scrambling upward once more, there was a sound—one grown hatefully familiar to Dworn since the night before, the feverish buzzing of a number of light high-speed engines. He opened his mouth to hiss a warning, but Qanya too had heard. Instantly she guided the spider-machine as close as possible to the cliff, where the hollowed rock afforded some shelter, and twirled a knob that made it sink down, legs folding compactly.

They waited scarcely breathing. A couple of times before they had huddled like this, while flights of the winged enemies whistled over ... but the wingless ones? It seemed impossible that they should be up here, where surely nothing that ran on wheels could travel....

The head of a column of the aluminum crawlers came into view, whirring along the ledge with a confident air of knowing where they were going. One by one, the little machines rolled past within a few feet of the crouching spider, hastening on with an uncanny preoccupation.

Dworn saw that, like those he had seen earlier, they were of diverse kinds; and several of them, fitted with claws and racks for transporting booty, were heavily laden now with metal plates and girders carved from some larger machine, a roll of caterpillar tread, a slightly bent axle.... The last pygmy in line, whose afterbody was a bloated tank, gurgled as it jolted by, and trailed an aroma of looted fuel.

A few yards beyond the staring watchers, each of the little plunderers pivoted sharply in its turn and without even slackening speed vanished straight into the cliff-face. Dworn and Qanya looked incredulously at one another.

"A tunnel!" Dworn grunted in realization.

That explained one mystery, at least—how, if the winged and wingless strangers' home base was somewhere above the cliffs, the wheeled machines contrived to forage at the foot of the Barrier. They must have one or more inclined tunnels, bored through solid rock for a distance that staggered Dworn's imagination. Emerging at this level, they had found or constructed a passable road the rest of the way to the valley floor.... Now he noticed that the ledge to which the spider had so laboriously climbed showed signs of being an often-used trail, and the cliffs it skirted exhibited in places the raw marks of recent blasting.

"Remember this spot," he told Qanya. "If we should return this same way—there's evidently an easier path down."

She said nothing. Dworn wondered wrily if, in her drug beclouded mind, she was aware of how unlikely it was that either of them would be returning from beyond the Barrier.

A mad enterprise indeed—a ghost and a zombie, going to seek out a foe

whose numbers and whose might grew ever more apparent. The tunnel opening here was clear evidence of engineering resources and skill far beyond that of any of the machine races Dworn knew.

Its discovery was no help to them, since it was far too small to admit the spider.

"Go on!" Dworn ordered doggedly. "At least we know now that their dwelling can't be far!"

Qanya glanced briefly sidelong at him, then moved the levers, and the spider rocked upright once more and began to climb.

The sun was low, and the shadows of rocks and dunes in the valley behind them were pointing long blue fingers eastward, when the machine staggered up the last precipitous ascent and stood on level ground at the summit.

Dworn took a deep breath and looked ahead, looked for the first time in his life upon the unknown land beyond the Barrier.

At first glance, it differed little from any of the desert country where he had lived all his life. The ground shelved gradually away from the rocky rim on which they stood; far off, against the darkening eastern sky, blue mountains rose murkily, but between here and the ranges lay a vast shallow depression, an arid sink floored with wind-rippled sand. Perhaps it had been a lake-bed once, before natural or unnatural cataclysms, and the millennial drying-up of all this country, had emptied it of water. Or perhaps—as its circular form suggested—it was one of those other, mysterious depressions which were scattered irregularly across the face of the earth where no lakes had ever been; those, legend said, were scars left by the ancients' wars.

The rich light of the declining sun fell at a shallow angle into the miles-wide bowl and brought out with startling clarity the maze of wheel-tracks, crossing and criss-crossing, which covered its sandy expanse and testified to a fever of recent machine activity there. The light gleamed, too, here and there, upon scurrying metallic shapes, that raced by ones and twos or in trickling columns to and from the center of the bowl, where—

Dworn strained his eyes and his capacity for belief in an effort to make sense of the structures there, miles away. He was not very successful, for the scene was too unlike anything he had ever looked on before.

There were certain races which built stationary dwellings—Dworn knew of the scale-makers who lived, in colonies sometimes of considerable size, beneath individual armored, anchored domes sunk into the face of some impregnable rock; he knew of the sand devils with their pits, and now he had seen also how the spider people nested. But the huge buildings that loomed yonder, lowering and windowless, and the winged things clustering thick on the ground about them, were such as he had never seen in his nomadic life.

Atop a slender tower that spired above the squat structures he could

make out something which turned and turned, something like a broad net of lacy wires, revolving steadily from east to west, from north to south. Strange, too, the smooth-surfaced ways that radiated outward in four directions, like an immense cross, broad paved roads that came to abrupt dead ends a mile or more from the central buildings.... After a moment, though, he guessed that those were runways for the aircraft which flew from this place.

The unknown builders were obviously a mighty people, a people who had perfected their peculiar form of organization on a gigantic scale. And a people who acted and thought strangely; for their behavior, as Dworn had observed it, suggested a chilly-blooded and fanatic discipline, a regimentation which he found monstrous and repellent.

Dworn turned questioning eyes on Qanya. "I don't know what they are," she answered his unspoken query in a voice that faltered. "I remember this valley. But a few months ago it was uninhabited. All this has been built since then."

Dworn hesitated. He was seeing very clearly now just how hopeless this mad expedition was. Nevertheless, he had sworn vengeance, and he could at least perish with honor.

But—Seeing the fear in Qanya's face, it came to him sharply that, after all, she had no part in his blood feud. She had served him well by bringing him this far. The vague plans he had had, of using the spider-machine for an attack on the enemy, stood revealed as rankest folly. Big and powerful as the spider was by ordinary standards, against such as those it could accomplish little more than a man with his bare hands.

Which was what Dworn would be—He stifled further reflection, said crisply: "You can go now. I'll remain here; I have a duty to perform. But you can return—go make your peace with your people, or whatever you like."

Qanya's black eyes met his squarely. "I won't," she said.

"Now see here—" Dworn began, and broke off, thunderstruck.

"B-but," he gulped, "you can't disobey me. The drug, the spider poison..."

"Doesn't work on a born spider. I must have neglected to mention that, naturally, we're all immunized against it." She smiled with a flash of those sharp white teeth.

"Then—then—" Dworn stumbled, feeling his preconceptions tossed helter-skelter. "Then you must have come with me—of your own free will!"

"At first," murmured Qanya, "I knew you'd never trust me unless I pretended ... and I was curious, too, to see how it was to be the one that obeyed. And then ... well, you'd have known, if you'd ever seen how the drug really works. You should have realized, anyway, when I laughed at you.... But you do so love to be masterful don't you?"

For a moment, Dworn's chief emotion was one of quick rage at the revelation of how thoroughly she'd de-

ceived him. Then the anger subsided and left him feeling merely foolish, as he saw that she'd merely let him deceive himself. And, finally—as it came home to him that this girl had followed him of her own choice into exile and great danger—a new and quite unaccustomed feeling flooded in on him, a queer sense of humility.

"I'm sorry," he said confusedly. "I didn't—I don't—understand."

She breathed in a barely audible voice, "You said I was beautiful.... And you hadn't the drug."

From far away, from around the vast, mysterious buildings, came mournful hooting sounds, a sighing and a sobbing as of some mythical monster in torment.

Dworn was rudely recalled to realization of where they were—and of the fact that, as the spider-machine stood poised here on the cliff-edge, it would be starkly visible from over there, seen against the setting sun.

He gave up trying to unsnarl the tangle of his own feelings. He said hurriedly, "But you should go back. There's no time—I have to go on. But there's no reason you should die."

Qanya's face was drawn and determined. "No," she said flatly.

"I don't know what you're talking about. But I won't leave you now...."

The distant sighing rose to a whining roar.

"Quick!" cried Dworn in desperation. "Find cover. I think we've been seen!"

The girl reached for the controls and the spider's engine raced up. But it was already late. Off yonder, along that one of the radiating runways that stretched toward them, something was moving, racing swiftly and more swiftly outward with its long shadow following it.

All at once the moving thing left its shadow behind, and Dworn recognized it for an aircraft taking off.

Then he had to snatch for a handhold as the spider-machine lunged into a dead run. At full speed on the level ground, it could make good time; the ground outside skimmed past at fifty or sixty miles an hour.

Qanya had spied some rocky outcroppings, which might furnish a modicum of shelter, about a mile away and some distance from the brink of the cliffs, and she was heading for them. But the terrain nearer at hand was implacably flat—and the enemy was airborne, a vicious winged shape growing at terrifying speed. Its whistling roar swelled and grew deafening.

Qanya shouted something inaudible and pointed. Dworn understood, and, holding on for dear life in the pitching cabin, clawed his way within reach of the fire-controls. Wrestling with the unfamiliar mechanism, he fought to train the spider's guns on the hurtling attacker.

Puffs of smoke bloomed high in air—but any hit on such a fast-moving target, from so unstable a platform, would have been a miracle. The enemy screeched overhead, and an instant later flame and thunder erupted all

around the running spider. The machine stumbled and for a moment seemed going down, but it righted itself and staggered on.

Dworn shook his ringing head and saw the flier banking steeply half a mile away, while a second and a third were climbing against the sky, gaining altitude to dive.

They couldn't last another thirty seconds, couldn't even hope to reach the doubtful cover of the rocks.... Up ahead, two hundred yards, was a low mound, only a few feet high, the only nearby elevation of any sort. And it was plainly artificial, though wind-piled sand had softened its outlines; others like it were scattered around the periphery of the great sink, and Dworn guessed their nature as he saw a column of the aluminum crawlers beginning to emerge from the side of the one just ahead. It must be the other end of a tunnel such as they had discovered among the cliffs....

He nudged Qanya urgently, shouted, "Head for that!"

She gave him a fleeting, wide-eyed look. The mound's low swell could furnish no shelter for the towering spider, and the tunnel mouth was of course much too small to enter. But she veered without slackening speed in the direction indicated.

Dworn abandoned the useless guns. The mound, with a gleaming line of crawlers still parading out of it, swept closer; and at the same time the desert echoed back the screaming onrush of the two new attackers.

Dworn wrenched open the cabin door with one hand. His other arm circled Qanya's waist, dragged her away from the controls. She cried in uncomprehending shock as he swung her before him into the open doorway. They swayed there, high above the speeding ground, wind whipping at them as the spider pounded blindly on.

The mound loomed immediately at hand. Dworn prayed that he had judged the moment right, and with a mighty leap launched both of them out into space. A pistoning steel leg barely missed them. Even as they fell, the air was torn by explosions as the swooping fliers opened fire.

Dworn hit the ground with almost stunning force. His hold on the girl was broken and he was rolled helplessly over and over by his own momentum. But he fetched up on hands and knees, bruised and breathless but unhurt.

From the corner of his eye he saw Qanya sitting up dizzily, half-buried in the drifted sand that had broken their fall. Apparently she too was uninjured, but she was staring in horrified fascination after her runaway machine.

The spider careened onward, no hand at its controls. It hit the line of crawling little machines coming from underground; it knocked one spinning end over end, and stepped squarely on another, stamping it flat. It recovered its balance amazingly, and loped on, even though one leg was buckling beneath it... .

Then it was hit dead-on by what must have been at least a hundred-

pound high explosive rocket.

The winged killers shot low overhead with an exultant whoop of jets, peeling off to right and left of the column of smoke that rose and towered where the spider had been struck. Out of the cloud, metal fragments soared glinting upward and arced back to earth, and on the ground, amid smoke and dust, a metal limb was briefly visible, flexing convulsively and growing still.

Dworn heard a smothered sound beside him. A tear rolled down Qanya's smudged cheek, and Dworn thought fuzzily, Even spiders can cry. Only, he corrected, she's not a spider any more she's now just a ghost like me.

If he hadn't been a ghost already, if he hadn't lost his own machine—the idea of jumping clear and saving both their human lives while letting the spider be destroyed would never have occurred to him.

He came to himself, hissed, "Down! Keep low and maybe they'll overlook us!"

They huddled together on the slope of the sandhill, while the victorious flying enemy circled round in a miles-wide sweep and began descending toward their base again, wing-flaps braking them for landing.

And on the ground meanwhile, the crawlers which had come from the tunnel were proceeding on their way, leaving two of their number behind with strange indifference to their own casualties.

"What'll we do?" quavered Qanya.

Dworn had time to take stock of the situation. The tunnel-mound was, as he had seen before, the only cover—and that a poor one—for a considerable distance. It was all of a quarter mile to the edge beyond which the cliffs fell away.

He tried to sound hopeful—whether for Qanya's sake or to keep up his own courage, he could hardly have said. "I think we'll have to stay here, and hope we're not noticed, until it gets dark. Then, maybe—"

Qanya caught her breath sharply and gripped his arm. "Look—there!"

Still far away across the sloping floor of the great bowl, but rapidly approaching from its center, moved a dust cloud. Beneath it, the expiring sunlight glinted on the aluminum shells of at least a score of the ground machines.

Dworn said grimly, "Might have expected it; they'll be coming to look over the scene of action and pick up the pieces. We've one chance; keep out of sight behind this little hill, and maybe they won't investigate too closely."

Qanya nodded, biting her lip. She could reckon as well as he how much that chance was worth.

The buzzing motors came nearer. The two cowering in the lee of the mound, almost without daring to breathe, heard them halt, slow to idling speed one by one a little way off, where the wrecked spider lay. From that spot obscure sounds began rising, thuds and gratings and a shrill hissing noise.

But then—the whine of a single high-speed engine rose again, clear to their hearing. One of the enemy was

approaching around the flank of the sandhill.

They crouched motionless, frozen. No hope in either flight or fight; on the open ground, they would be run down in no time, and they had no weapons—even the notion of a weapon, as something apart from the fighting machine that carried it, was alien to their thinking.

The enemy vehicle rolled into full view and nosed slowly along the base of the mound; its motor whining questingly, only a few yards of gentle slope between it and the huddled pair. Its vision-ports glinted redly in the sunset glow, and Dworn could almost feel the raking of murderous eyes from behind them.... Like the other machines of this kind he had seen it was small and without armor—it couldn't weigh more than a couple of thousand pounds, and it carried no guns. From the vantage of his armed and armored beetle, he had regarded its like as flimsy and harmless-looking.... But now he realized for the first time how helpless a mere human was against such a thing, and, with an irrepressible shudder, how easily the grappling and cutting-tools this one was equipped with might be employed for—dismantling—flesh and blood.

The machine paused momentarily. Then its engine revved up again. It rolled on past, giving no sign of excitement, and vanished beyond the hillside.

"Dworn, Dworn, it didn't see us!" Qanya was sobbing with relief.

Dworn was staring after the enemy, brows puzzledly drawn downward. The sounds from the other side of the mound went on uninterrupted—a clangor of metal, the prolonged shrilling of a cutting-torch, where evidently they were at work breaking up the smashed spider-vehicle.

He said huskily, "Something's very queer about them.... Wait. I've got to take a look."

Qanya glanced at him in quick alarm as he started wriggling to the crest of the sandhill. Then she followed silently, and peered over the top beside him.

Twilight was descending, but they could still see easily enough what went on out there. Not a hundred yards away, the little machines swarmed about the spider, bringing their various wrecking equipment into play to dismantle it rapidly under the watchers' eyes. Torches flared, winches tugged at fragments of the shattered monster. An aluminum cylinder with a serrated alligator snout rolled triumphantly away, bearing aloft the shank of a great steel leg....

But Dworn's attention was riveted by what was happening closer at hand. Here, near the tunnel-entrance that opened just below their observation point, lay the two crawlers which the runaway spider had disabled. One of these, the one which had merely been overturned and severely dented, was already being dragged away, wheels still helplessly in the air, by a towing-machine. The other had been smashed beyond repair. Around it several of the new arrivals were busy, callously and efficiently beginning to take it apart.

Dworn watched them at it, and the dreadful suspicion that had budded in his mind ripened into a monstrous certainty.

Aluminum skin was swiftly stripped away; frame members of the same metal were clipped neatly asunder by a machine armed with great shearing jaws. The engine came loose and was hoisted aloft carried dangling away by another specialized machine. In an incredibly short time, little but a bare chassis remained, and that too was being attacked by the salvagers.

And Dworn knew at last beyond all doubt, what manner of things these were.

Beside him he heard a sharp gasp, and turned to put a warning finger on Qanya's lips. He drew her gently back with him, out of view of the activities on the farther side of the mound.

"You understand what that means?"

The girl nodded soberly. "We have the tradition. I think that must be one tradition that all the peoples have in common."

"Then you know what we have to do."

She nodded again.

Between them the word hung unspoken—a word not to be uttered lightly, so awful was it in its connotations, freighted with memories of a terror rooted in the youth of the world.

Drones.

In the beginning—said the stories—there were the ancients, who were great and powerful beyond the imagining of the latter-day peoples. But the ancients were divided among themselves, for some of them were good and some of them were evil.

So they fought one another, with the terrific weapons of devastation which they owned. And the good triumphed in the end, as it must—though at terrible cost, for in those wars the earth was stripped almost lifeless; searing flame, plague, climatic convulsions wiped out the varied life which once populated the world, and finally there remained only the peoples of the machine, all of whom—diverse though their ways of existence had become, and for all that they lived in ceaseless conflict with each other—were descended from the victors in that primal struggle of men like gods.

But the evil old ones, though they were vanquished and their seed utterly annihilated, had nevertheless found a way to perpetuate their evil upon the earth. For before the last of them died, as a final act of vindictive atrocity, they created the drones....

Qanya was shivering uncontrollably. She whispered, "No one remembers when they last came. Some thought there were none left in the world."

"It's the same among my people," Dworn said hushedly. "There's no record of the drones' having appeared in the time of anyone now living.... But here they are."

From out of sight came the rattle and clank and whine of machines at work. And from farther away, from the direction of the great windowless buildings, there were hootings and throb-

bing sounds, and from time to time a deep rumbling that shook the earth.

Those noises were somehow unspeakably horrible now—now that they knew there was no one there. No one—nothing but the machines, without feeling or thought, without life, with only the blind meaningless activity of unliving mechanism set in motion and made self-subsisting a thousand or two thousand years ago....

With infinite caution the two humans peeked once again over the summit of the mound. Out there on the flat, the little wingless drones buzzed to and fro with their false seeming of animation, finishing their work.

From around the great buildings, whose interior no living eyes had ever looked upon, lights winked oddly blue through the thickening dusk. They caught glimpses of immense moving machinery, and heard mysterious sounds. Once and again, it seemed that in the open space before the structures a great door opened in the earth, and against a blue light that streamed upward they saw a vast winged shape rise majestically from underground and roll slowly forward into the shadows to join others already ranked there.

"What are they doing?"

"I don't know...." Dworn reflected, grasping at memories of the legends, the traditions he had heard. What he recalled was ominous. "I think I can guess, though. I think they're getting ready to swarm."

Her stifled exclamation was sign enough that she understood.

If the guess was right, the danger was on the verge of being multiplied many times over. Soon now, a swarm of queen ships would take to the air and fly in all directions, sowing the seed of the robot plague broadcast far and wide; one such colonizing vessel, no doubt, had founded this great hive only a few months ago. The things worked fast....

And Dworn's duty, and Qanya's, became all the more clear and urgent. Duty to spread the warning, at whatever risk to themselves. In the face of that, Dworn's mission of personal blood vengeance became unimportant—even if it had been possible to take such vengeance upon a foe with no life to forfeit.

He whispered to Qanya, "The ground machines are about to leave. When they're gone, we'll have to make a break for it." For some reason, as he pondered the distance they must cross to reach the Barrier cliffs, he recalled the strange revolving thing atop the central tower off yonder, turning constantly with its air of restless searching.... He swallowed painfully, repeated, "Have to."

The girl nodded silently. Impulsively Dworn put his arm around her; she pressed close against him. They huddled together like that, finding in one another's living warmth some measure of encouragement against the terror of the falling night in which nothing moved but the lifeless machines.

They watched while the lights glimmered far off across the flats; while a flight of fighter drones took off from there and howled away into the dark on

some roving patrol; while, at last, the salvaging machines finished their work and rolled loot-laden away one by one.

More than once while they waited, other columns of the wingless drones entered or emerged from the tunnel mouth at the base of the mound. The tempo of activity in the hive was, if anything, increased as night came on. In the deepening darkness a faint blue glow streamed from the tunnel mouth.

As the whirring of the last salvager receded, Dworn got cautiously to his feet. He said between his teeth, "We'd better move fast, now—"

"Wait," said Qanya tensely. "They'll sight us in the open, and then what chance will we have?"

Dworn tried to make out her expression, but in the darkness her face was only a white blur. "We've got to try. There's no other way."

"Perhaps there is. What about the tunnel?"

Dworn was brought up short; that idea hadn't occurred to him at all. He said slowly, "I see what you mean, It's only big enough for one-way traffic—and the drones evidently have some system of remote control, so that outbound expeditions aren't using it at the same time as returning ones...."

"So, if we wait till some of the wingless ones enter from this end, and hurry through the tunnel close behind them—" Qanya left the sentence uncompleted. Dworn knew she could imagine as well as he what would happen if they failed to time it right, and met a drone column coming from the opposite direction. Still, the sound sense of the girl's ideas was obvious.

"All right," he said. "We'll try it that way."

It was another nerve-fraying wait until a file of ground machines came winding near and vanished one after another into the tunnel.

The two watchers gave them a little time—not too much—to get clear of the entrance. Then Dworn clasped Qanya's hand tightly in his own, and together they plunged down the sliding slope of the sandhill. The tunnel mouth yawned in its side, the bore on which it opened slanting steeply down into the earth, inwardly lit with eery blue light.

Hearts pounding, they raced into the tunnel.

It was an unreal, nightmare flight. The blue shaft curved and descended endlessly. Endlessly ahead of them echoed the snarling of drone engines.

They ran with lungs near to bursting, through air heavy and foul with exhaust gases—trying frantically to keep close behind that engine noise, while it receded inexorably before them. And once and again, amid the tricky tunnel echoes, Dworn was almost sure that other drones had entered and were descending the narrow way behind them, and before his eyes flashed hideous visions of the two of them overtaken and run down, here where there was scarcely room to turn, let alone fight or hide.

The featureless walls were pressing inward to crush them, swimming before eyes filmed with exhaustion, in the blue

shimmer which no doubt sufficed for the perceptions of the drones but which hardly served human vision....

The tunnel was in fact perhaps a thousand yards long.

But it seemed as if they had been staggering for a lifetime through the nightmare, through the blue glow, and it scarcely seemed real when a patch of night sky showed through the exit before them, and when they stumbled panting out into the clean cold air of the mountainside, and saw the white radiance of moonrise over the Barrier cliffs above them.

They sank down to catch their breath on a rock not far from the tunnel. They'd made it none too soon—only a minute or two had passed when the night once more buzzed with motor noise, and a column of foraging drones rolled up the trail and plunged at full speed into the mouth of the shaft.

Qanya buried her face against Dworn's shoulder.

"Easy, now," Dworn whispered, patting her with clumsy gentleness. "The worst's over. We made it ... Qanya, darling, we made it!"

She looked up at him and by the moonlight he saw her smile tremulously. She said breathlessly, "Would ... would you mind saying that again, please?"

The moon was already high as they trudged across the rolling desert beyond the foot of the great landslip.

After the tunnel, the rest of the descent had been relatively easy; they had followed the trail used by the wingless drones, being forced off it only once by the passage of a cavalcade of the little marauders. And they had discovered, to their surprise, that the human physique—inferior though it might be to machines in ruggedness, speed, and other respects—was better equipped for traversing rough terrain than the most ingenious vehicle ever constructed.

But both of them, unaccustomed as they were to walking on their own feet, were dead weary. They tramped on doggedly, searching the shadows, hoping to come upon some living machine-creature—of what race, didn't matter now.

So far they had seen only abundant evidence that the drones were abroad in force tonight, preparing perhaps for their swarming time. Drones in the air and on the ground, and once the burnt-out shell of an unidentifiable machine with a crew of the wingless salvagers worrying it, and once the light of fires afar off where the winged ones had made a kill....

Qanya stumbled, and Dworn caught her round the waist as she swayed.

"Tired," she gasped in a little girl's voice, then stiffened her back with a resolute effort.

"We'd better rest—"

"No," she said shakily; and then abruptly: "Listen!"

Not very far away, lost somewhere among the tricky moon-shadows, there was a stealthy crunching. It was coming nearer.

With instinctive caution the two

hugged the pool of shadow beside a boulder.

"Spiders!" Qanya recognized them first.

They came prowling out of the shadows, crunching rhythmically across an open moonlit space towards a hollow beyond. One, two, four of them, moving with furtive caution through the perilous night.

They had to be intercepted, the warning given. But it was a critically dangerous moment—suspicious and on edge, they might fire at the first movement they saw.

"Stay here," said Dworn shortly. He thrust Qanya back into the shadows, and walked steadfastly out into the clear moonlight, in the path of the walking spider machines.

He raised one hand on high, palm outward in an immemorial gesture that he could only hope would be seen.

He shouted at the top of his voice, "Stop! Don't shoot! I come in peace!"

His heart leaped. The leading spider ground to a halt, and the others behind it. He saw a dim figure move atop the foremost towering machine; and before he could speak again, heard the rasping voice of the Spider Mother herself.

"You! The one who got away—and who seduced one of us from the ways of her ancestors—? What peace can there be between you and us?"

"I bring," cried Dworn clearly, "warning of the Drone."

There was stunned silence.

Dworn sensed the other spiders watching from the height of their machines; and he guessed something of what must be going on in the mind of the fierce old woman staring down at him. She would be wondering if an alien, a mere beetle, would be so far without honor, so anxious to save his own skin, as to lie in such a matter.

Then he felt Qanya's hand in his, and heard her cry out, her voice vibrant and assured: "It is true, Mother! I have seen them too. The night-fliers, the raiders—they are the evil things our legends tell of!"

The great machine took two steps forward and knelt low to the ground. "Come here!" rasped the Spider Mother, and when the two advanced till she could look into their young faces—"You swear to this?"

"We swear!" they said at the same moment.

The Spider Mother's face was like iron. She looked from one to the other slowly.

"Then," she said stiffly and formally, leaning over to extend a wrinkled hand to Dworn, "let there be peace between us ... between me and mine and you and yours, and among all living peace ... till the evil is no more!" Dworn took the hand, and answered, hurriedly recalling ancient custom: "Till the evil is no more!" And heard Qanya echo the words.

All night the desert was stirring, with a feverish hastening of messengers. These were at first spiders—then, members of a half dozen, a dozen other races, as the word was passed from one

people to another—as tribe after tribe of hardbitten, suspicious warriors, fingers, fidgeting on triggers at the open approach of their hereditary mortal foes, heard and were electrified by the news—

The Coming of the Drone!

And hand gripped hand, all feuds were forgotten, the peoples mingled in a common effort of hurried mobilization. The desert land below the cliffs crawled with them, a mixed multitude of constantly increasing numbers, girding themselves for war.

Ferocious predatory machines—spiders, wheel-bugs, scorpions—formidable in their armor and bristling with guns, lay alongside the more pacific slugs and caterpillars and snails which in ordinary times were their natural prey, and were freely fuelled and provisioned out of the stores which normally their possessors would have fought to the death to safeguard against the despoilers....

In the presence of the drones, there were no more natural enmities. For the drones were the Enemy. Their coming meant that all life was kindred; deep in the heritage of every people was the almost instinctive knowledge that, if the drones were not checked as tradition decreed, their blind automatic propagation would end by sweeping every living thing from the face of the Earth.

Toward morning, the chiefs of a score of tribes held council of war in the very shadow of the Barrier. Their consultation was brief; there was no arguable question of what must be done, only of how. And if the drones were about to swarm, they must act promptly. No time to wait for the gathering of more distant peoples; no time to send word to the wasps or the hornets and gain aerial support. They must strike with what they had.

Dworn started awake as a hand touched his shoulder. He sat up, angrily flinging a coverlet from him.

"I didn't intend to sleep!" he muttered, rubbing his eyes and realizing where he was—below ground in the spiders' colony, whither he and Qanya had been taken and where he had been persuaded to lie down and rest a little while the warning was carried by others.

The tall blonde spider, Purri, was grinning maliciously down at him. "Hear the beetle talk! I suppose, after a day spent in what, for you was comparative idleness, you felt like doing something really strenuous ... say going out and demolishing the drones' hive bare handed...?"

Dworn climbed to his feet. With a violent effort he kept from wincing at the protest of stiffened muscles and yesterday's collection of bruises.

"What's going on out there now? Where's Qanya?"

"There's really nothing more you can do, you know. I merely woke you because I thought you'd want to hear that your beetle-folk have been contacted—they'd holed up to lick their wounds about twenty miles south of here—and have joined the fighting force that's getting ready to attack the

drones at dawn. As for dear little Qanya, she's sleeping angelically in the next chamber...."

"No, she isn't," said Qanya from the doorway.

"You, too?" said Purri with irritation. "And what do you want, scapegrace?"

Qanya's black eyes narrowed dangerously. She moved forward to Dworn's side and took a grip on his arm. "I might ask what you're doing here disturbing—"

"Both of you, you're wasting time," growled Dworn.

He'd heard with a queer pang that his people—those who remained alive—had been located. Not that it made any real difference, of course. His father was dead, and he, Dworn, was dead too as far as his own kind was concerned. Nor, in this world, was there anywhere else he could turn.

For the present, under the threat of the Drone, that didn't matter. All laws of all peoples were in abeyance for the duration of the great emergency. But once the threat was dissolved, and the old laws resumed their force, the plight of Dworn and of Qanya also would be what it had been—that of outcasts in a world where an outcast had no chance of survival.

Well, it was no use thinking of the future. Dworn said determinedly: "I want to see the end of this business, at least."

"And I!" declared Qanya. "We've earned that right."

Purri eyed them sourly, shrugged. "As you like. I'm in command here while the Mother's busy at the front. I'll see you get transportation up there." Turning toward the door, she glanced sidelong at Dworn.... "You'll have to go separately, since a spider will only carry two. I'm leaving right away myself; you may come with me in my machine—"

"No, he won't," declared Qanya with finality, tightening her hold on Dworn's arm. "He can ride with old Zimka." Purri stalked through the doorway before them, grumbling to herself, "Why is it the best ones always get away?"

Earlier in the night, climbing spiders—the only machines which could manage the ascent of the toppled Barrier—had scouted the periphery of the drones' fortress, and discovered the sole possible approach to it. At a single spot above the slide, a low ridge made it feasible to surmount the rim and steal out onto the table-land beyond without coming in direct view of the enemy's installations.

Once that was known, the council of chiefs decided on a daring strategy. Up the thousand-foot slope of tumbled rocks below that one vulnerable point, a fantastic supply line was established. One by one, machines from among those massing on the desert below toiled upward until wheels or treads could carry them no further; then they were hoisted bodily over the precipices by the invaluable spiders, who anchored themselves firmly in place with the powerful steel cables they ordinarily used for snaring prey, and used other such cables as pulleys.

Through the remaining hours of darkness the joined forces labored with Herculean devotion to accomplish the seemingly impossible task. There were brushes with the enemy, for the wingless drones still came and went about the mountainside and from time to time their winged kindred flew overhead. But strict orders had gone out to all the allied peoples—avoid opening fire, avoid precipitating a general engagement, and freeze motionless whenever the fliers passed over. This last instruction rested on the observation that the robot predators, with whatever sensory devices they used, apparently had difficulty in spotting anything but a moving target.

In this wise, when dawn began to break, close to three hundred first-line fighting machines of a dozen different species had been raised to the summit of the Barrier. Thence they filtered cautiously out across the plateau, in a great arc moving to enclose the hollow of the drones.

The sky was lightening when Dworn and Qanya settled themselves to watch from the crest of the rocky ridge which had shielded the attacking forces' deployment not far from the brink of the cliffs. Behind them, the spiders which had brought them here melted stealthily away toward the east, going to take their places in the battle line.

The two were alone once more, looking out over the vast circular depression infested by the enemy, just as they had yesterday at sunset. But today, as the sun rose, the situation was very different. For miles around the circumference of the great hive, there were furtive stirrings, last-minute movements of preparation for the imminent assault. From behind every outcropping and fold of the ground, grim gun-muzzles pointed inward, ready to begin spitting fire when the zero second came.

From here the central buildings of the hive were plainly visible, standing out against the sunrise. Around them moved many of the tireless worker machines; and the parked aircraft seemed more numerous than they had been the night before. Among them a score or more of winged shapes loomed conspicuous for their great size; when you made proper allowance for the distance, you realized that they were immense.

Those would be the queens—loaded and ready to take flight on their one-way journey to found new colonies wherever their evil destiny might lead them. The time of swarming was near.

Dworn scowled darkly, squinting against the light in an effort to judge the enemy's numbers. He grunted, "I hope ..." and bit his lip.

"What's wrong?" said Qanya tensely.

"Nothing.... Only it would have been well if we'd had time to bring up more reinforcements. But don't worry—we'll smash them." He was a little surprised to note that he said "we"—and meant any and all of the machine-peoples, united now in a common cause.

Dworn was bitterly wishing at this moment that he had had his beetle-machine again, and had been able to take

an active part. As it was, he didn't even know surely just where in the battle line the beetles had taken up their position.

A distant explosion, a single gunshot, rolled echoless across the flats. It was a signal. Even as the shell hit the ground close to the ranked drone aircraft, motors had begun to pulse and snarl all along the farflung line. The desert began to spew forth attackers. A motley horde of metal things, they darted, stalked, and lumbered from their lurking-places, and as they advanced to the assault the firing commenced in earnest, became a staccato thunder that blanketed but failed to drown out the beginning alarm-wail of a huge mechanical voice from the fortress of the drones.

The enemy was not slow to react. Almost as the first rain of projectiles smashed down among them, jet engines began howling into life, and some of the fighter craft rocked into motion, wheeling out onto the runways.

The encircling attackers well knew the peril of letting any of those pilotless killers get into the air. Shellfire was being concentrated on the airstrips, striving to block them, plow them up with craters.

A fighter drone came roaring out one of the runaways gathering speed and beginning to lift. Dworn followed it with his eyes, feeling sweat spring out on his forehead, repeating under his breath without conscious awareness of what he was saying: "Stop him, stop him—"

Then the enemy craft spun round in the air, belching smoke, came apart and spilled along the runway for a hundred yards. A second, coming close behind it, plowed into the wreckage of its comrade, rolled over and over and became a furiously burning pyre. That strip was blocked.

All round the central hive smoke and flame were rising in innumerable places, from the paved ways and from the open desert. On another launching strip, just visible through the mounting inferno, one of the big queen-craft had sought to take to the air, and had been knocked out by heavy shellfire. Now its upended and blazing hulk tilted slowly over and collapsed burying beneath it several of the little wingless workers. In all the confusion these still scurried hither and yon, oblivious to the bombardment, laboring frantically but futilely to clear away the debris. Their efforts were useless, while the rain of explosives from the tightening ring of assault forces continued adding to the ruin and disorder within the hive....

Dworn sprang to his feet for a better view. He hugged Qanya to him till she gasped for breath, shouted in her ear over the thunder of the barrage, "We've got them!"

Close to the ridge where they stood a line of many-wheeled monsters rolled past—scorpions, moving along the battle front and, whenever the thickening smoke up ahead revealed a target, halting to wheel round and discharge their heavy-caliber tail guns.

Dworn had never liked scorpions, but he watched these with heartfelt ap-

proval.

Then he stared, bewilderedly aware that something had gone wrong. The big machines had turned and begun heading toward the ridge, clattering along at their top speed and no longer pausing to fire.

Within moments, Dworn perceived that all the other attackers were doing likewise; everywhere on the blazing battlefield, they had ceased their advance and were scattering to seek cover.

Only then, as the firing slackened, did he realize that the sky had begun to echo with a spiteful screaming of flying things. Against the brightening daylight hurtled some two dozen dark winged shapes ... fighter drones.

Dworn realized they must have been out on patrol, and summoned back by the drones' mysterious means of communication to defend the threatened hive. Now the flight was splitting into groups of two or three, diving to attack at one point and another and flitting away again so swiftly that human reflexes could scarcely act to train a gun.

Dworn glimpsed Qanya's horrified face beside him, and the girl threw her weight against him and dragged him down among the sheltering rocks. Overhead, from out of the sun, shot three of the winged drones. They passed over before the shrieking of their flight could reach the ears, and Dworn caught a glimpse of bombs tumbling earthward. Thunder crashed as the scorpions hugging the ridge threw up a vicious defensive barrage, and was drowned out as the bombs landed all around. The rocks heaved, and dust and splinters showered down from above.

Only a dozen yards away, a scorpion came rumbling up across the crest, its many wheels jolting over the rocks, and halted there, its tail gun weaving angrily as it sought vainly for targets in the sky. Along one of its gray-painted sides was a long bright gash where something had barely glanced from its armor. And Dworn saw, too, the black outline of a mythological arachnid on its observation turret, which signified that the machine belonged to a scorpion chief.

Scarcely knowing what he intended, he shook off Qanya's panic grip and plunged recklessly toward the big machine. As he scrambled over the rugged hilltop, he saw fleetingly what went on in the arena of battle—the allied peoples were being driven back, forced to concentrate their fire power on beating off aerial onslaughts. Meantime, the wingless drones about their beleaguered citadel worked feverishly to clear the way for their fighters that still remained undamaged on the ground.... Within minutes, unless something happened to turn the tide, there would be enough flying drones aloft to break the attack and inflict terrible losses.

Dworn found himself alongside the scorpion, just as its tail gun fired once more. The muzzle blast almost knocked him down, but he clawed his way up the side of the machine and began hammering on the observation turret hatchcover.

"You in there!" he shouted. "Listen to me—"

The hatch cracked open and a grizzled head peered out, blinking at him with bewilderment and an automatic fierce suspicion. But at a time like this anything human was an ally.

"What's the idea?" demanded the scorpion.

The racket of gunfire and of jets made speech almost impossible. But Dworn pointed out across the sink, shouted: "Fire on the buildings—the central tower! They're controlled from somewhere—"

Luckily the scorpion leader—if that was who he was—was a man of quick understanding. He nodded vigorously and dropped out of sight again into the interior of his vehicle, bawling something to its driver. Dworn dropped off the machine's side as it lurched abruptly into motion. He watched, hardly breathing, as it slid to a halt at the bottom of the hill beside another of its tribe, and with shouts and gestures the word was passed on.

Inside a minute, all the nearby scorpions had begun banging away at the structures some three miles distant. The heavy scorpion guns were quite capable of carrying that far, and their shells had enough punch to do much damage to the buildings or to the central tower which still loomed occasionally visible through the drifting smoke....

But it was only a hope, perhaps even a forlorn hope. Dworn was fairly confident of his guess that the drones possessed some sort of central communication and control system—but it would take a lucky hit to disable that nerve center in time.

Qanya stumbled to his side. She cried something he couldn't hear over the continuous firing, tugged at him and pointed skyward with terror in her eyes.

The flying drones aloft had suddenly abandoned their scattered strafing attacks. With deadly machine-precision they wheeled into a single formation once more, and the whole flight came diving straight at the scorpion battery's position.

Dworn stood rigid, fists clenched at his sides, watching them scream nearer.

He ignored Qanya's pleading with him to take cover. No point to that—the drones' full force would blast the whole ridge to rubble and blanket it with their liquid flame.

At least, the enemy's reaction proved his inspiration correct. He noticed with fierce satisfaction that the scorpions were still doggedly firing....

The foremost drone came on, slanting down the sky until the gaping rocket-ports were plainly visible along its swept-back wings. But those sports still spat no flame. And it came on. It cleared the hilltop by no more than fifty feet, still diving faster than the speed of sound. It hit the desert slope beyond and ricocheted like a great projectile, bursting apart into fiery fragments that strewed themselves for a thousand yards across the rolling plateau.

Dworn picked himself up from among the rocks where he had been

flung by the shock-wave of its near passage, and was knocked sprawling again by the earthquake impact of a second drone that thundered headlong into the earth a few hundred feet away, burying itself under a crater like that of a huge bomb.

He glimpsed a third craft going down to the west of them, just missing the rim of the Barrier cliffs and plunging out of sight without a sign of coming out of its dive.

Those which remained in the air were flying aimlessly. Two of them passed over side by side, gradually converging until, a couple of miles away, they locked wings and went spinning down toward the horizon in a deadly embrace.

On the ground, a like confusion had befallen the wingless workers. Their scurrying suddenly lost all its busy, planned efficiency. Some buzzed round and round in drunken circles; others ran head-on into one another, or tumbled into shell-holes to lie futilely spinning their wheels.

A hush descended on the field of battle. After the fury of bombardment and counterattack, the relative silence was deafening.

Dworn got to his feet for the second time and helped Qanya up; he grinned exultantly at her, oblivious of a trickle of blood running down his face where a rock-splinter had hit.

The scorpion lying nearest the foot of the slope opened its hatch-cover. A man climbed out, clasped hands together over his head and stamped on the gray monster's back in an awkward impromptu victory-dance. Cheers rang faintly from far off down the silenced firing-line.

Then—the spell of premature triumph was rudely shattered.

From the direction of the breached and smoking buildings, there rose yet again the soughing roar of jet engines gathering speed. Onto the runway to the west—the only one which the workers had managed to clear before their central control was knocked out—came waddling an enormous winged thing.

Its multiple engines screamed up to a frenzied pitch, and it rolled out along the strip at increasing velocity. Its huge wheels narrowly missed a dead fighter slewed across the way. Its tail went up.

Naturally, the queen ships wouldn't be dependent on the nerve-center of the hive that had spawned them; for each of them carried within itself the full-grown robot brain, the nucleus of a new hive....

Shooting began again raggedly, the gunners caught unawares. Perhaps the great machine was hit—but to stop it would take more than one or two hits.

It reached and passed the end of the runway, its wheels barely clearing the ground as the paved strip ended. Black smoke belched from its engines as it spent fuel lavishly, fighting heavy-laden for altitude. It rocked with the concussion of shells bursting all around it, and then it was soaring out over the Barrier, dipping and rolling perilously in the downdrafts beyond the cliffs. But it steadied and flew on, out of range of the

guns, rising and dwindling until it was a speck, a mote vanishing into the western sky....

But no more queens escaped that day. The cannonade resumed with redoubled fury, and the guns did not fall silent until nothing was left to stir amid the gutted and blazing wreckage that had been the citadel of the drones.

Morning wind blew over the plateau, clearing away the reek of battle, bringing air that was cool and clear as it must have been in the morning of the world.

In that breeze like the breath of a new creation, it somehow seemed not at all strange to Dworn that he should be walking in the open under a daylight sky, among a multitude of excited strangers, men and women of all races, who mixed and exchanged greetings, laughed, shouted, slapped one another on the back ... then, perhaps, drew away for a moment with eyes of wonder at their own boldness....

Nor did it seem strange that Dworn strolled round the smoldering drone fortress hand in hand with a girl of the spider (who was by that token his hereditary foe,) and that he turned and kissed this enemy on the mouth, and she returned the kiss.

They stood with arms around one another, on the edge of the jubilant crowd, and looked out across the vast litter of smoking wreckage where scarcely a shell-holed wall stood upright now, from which the Enemy would no longer come to threaten the life of the Earth.

"One got away," said Qanya soberly.

"Yes. Somewhere it will all be to do over again." Dworn glanced toward the empty west, whither the queen flier had disappeared—where, perhaps, by now it would have crash-landed two or three hundred miles away, to spew forth its cargo of pygmy workers and (if the inhabitants or the area where it descended didn't discover and scotch it in time) to construct more workers, fighters, a hive no less formidable than the one that had perished today.

Dworn said, brow thoughtfully furrowed: "But maybe there's a good reason, even for the drones. Maybe they serve a purpose...." He faltered, unable to phrase the idea that had come to him—a thought that was not only unaccustomed but downright heretical. According to tradition the drones were the spawn of ancient evil and themselves wholly evil—but, Dworn was thinking, perhaps their existence produced good if, once in a generation or in ten generations, they came to remind the warring peoples that fundamentally all life was one in its eonlong conflict with no-life.

But he sensed, too, that that idea would take a long, long time to be worked out, to be communicated, to bear fruit....

Qanya's hand pressed his, and she said softly, "I think I know what you mean."

On one impulse they turned their backs to the ruins and gazed out across the throng of people, milling happily

about, rejoicing, among the grim war-machines that stood open and abandoned on every hand. Near by, a crew of pill-bugs had tapped containers of the special beverage they brewed for their own use, and were inviting all passers-by to pause and drink.

"Your people are here somewhere," said Qanya. Her eyes on Dworn were troubled. "Over there to the south, I think I saw some beetles parked. Do you want to visit them?"

Dworn sighed. "Your people are here too."

"I know."

Neither of them moved. They stood silent, their thoughts the same; in a little while now, the Peace of the Drone would be over, and all this celebrating crowd would grow warily quiet, would climb back into their various fighting machines, close the hatches and man the guns and creep away in their separate directions. The world would go its way again, a world in which there was no place left for the two of them....

Dworn blotted the image from his mind's eye and bent to kiss Qanya once more, while the Peace lasted.

A voice called, "Dworn!" A familiar voice—one that couldn't be real, that must be a trick of his ears.

He turned. A little way off stood a small group of people watching them, and in the forefront was a stalwart man of fifty, in the green garment of a beetle with a golden scarab blazoned on his chest—

"Father!" Dworn gasped unbelieving.

They grasped one another's hands and looked into one another's eyes. Dworn was only dimly aware of the others looking on—among them the hard-faced Spider Mother, and the grizzled chief scorpion whose cohorts had struck the decisive blow in the battle.

Yold smiled with a quizzically raised eyebrow. "You thought I was dead, no doubt? You came on the spot where we were attacked and you saw—"

Dworn nodded and gulped. "I couldn't have been mistaken. I saw your machine there, wrecked.... And now I've lost mine." His voice trailed off miserably.

His father gave him a penetrating look. "I see. You're supposing that means everything is over."

"Doesn't it?"

The chief smiled again. "When you departed for your wanderyear, you were still a boy, though you'd learned your lessons and your beetle traditions well.... But now you're a man. We don't tell boys everything."

Dworn stared at his father, while understanding dawned like a glory upon him. To live again, the life he'd thought lost—

"So far as I could learn, your beetle was disabled through no fault of your own. In fact, by what these strangers tell me—" Yold nodded towards the Spider Mother and the scorpion chief—"you've proved yourself worthy indeed, over and above the customary testing. Of course, there will be the formality of a rebirth ceremony—which I have to undergo, too, so we can both do so to-

gether.''

Dworn couldn't speak. Once again he had to remind himself that a beetle warrior didn't weep—not even tears of joy.

Then the Spider Mother spoke up, her voice brittle and metallic. ''The girl will naturally be returned to us. After this business, I am going to have to take pains to restore discipline in the Family.''

Dworn saw Qanya's desolate face, took one step to the girl's side and put a shielding arm around her. He felt Qanya trembling, and glared at the Spider Mother's implacable face.

''I won't go back!'' Qanya cried vehemently. ''I'll die first! I never wanted to be a spider, anyway!''

''And I,'' growled Dworn, ''won't let you take her. I won't let her go—'' his face was pale, but he went on resolutely—''even if it means I can't return to my own people.''

The beetle chief surveyed the two young people gravely, then turned to confront the old woman. He said, ''I don't see that you have any further claim on the girl. According to our customs, she too can be 'reborn'—this time into the beetle horde, as one of my people—and my son's.''

The head scorpion, looking on, nodded approval and grinned encouragingly at Dworn.

The Spider Mother and the chief exchanged a long, stony look—on either side, the look of a ruler used to command.

''It would be too bad,'' said Yold softly, ''to mar the Peace. But my warriors are within call, and....''

The Spider Mother turned away and spat. ''Have it your way. Who wants weaklings in the Family!''

The chief glanced sidelong at Dworn and Qanya, and saw that they were wholly absorbed in one another. With an open-handed gesture he invited the Spider Mother to follow him.

''Shall we go, then,'' he suggested politely, ''and—while the Peace still reigns—find out whether the pill-bugs' beverage is all they claim it is?''

THE WORLD BEYOND

Out of nowhere came these grim, cold, black-clad men, to kidnap three Earth people and carry them to a weird and terrible world where a man could be a giant at will.

The old woman was dying. There could be no doubt of it now. Surely she would not last through the night. In the dim quiet bedroom he sat watching her, his young face grim and awed. Pathetic business, this ending of earthly life, this passing on. In the silence, from the living room downstairs the gay laughter of the young people at the birthday party came floating up. His birthday—Lee Anthony, twenty-one years old today. He had thought he would feel very dif-

ferent, becoming—legally—a man. But the only difference now, was that old Anna Green who had been always so good to him, who had taken care of him almost all his life, now was dying.

Terrible business. But old age is queer. Anna knew what was happening. The doctor, who had given Lee the medicines and said he would be back in the morning, hadn't fooled her. And she had only smiled.

Lee tensed as he saw that she was smiling now; and she opened her eyes. His hand went to hers where it lay, so white, blue-veined on the white bedspread.

"I'm here, Anna. Feel better?"

"Oh, yes. I'm all right." Her faint voice, gently tired, mingled with the sounds from the party downstairs. She heard the laughter. "You should be down there, Lee. I'm all right."

"I should have postponed it," he said. "And what you did, preparing for it—"

She interrupted him, raising her thin arm, which must have seemed so heavy that at once she let it fall again. "Lee—I guess I am glad you're here—want to talk to you—and I guess it better be now."

"Tomorrow—you're too tired now..."

"For me," she said with her gentle smile, "there may not be any tomorrow—not here. Your grandfather, Lee—you really don't remember him?"

"I was only four or five."

"Yes. That was when your father and mother died in the aero accident and your grandfather brought you to me."

Very vaguely he could remember it. He had always understood that Anna Green had loved his grandfather, who had died that same year.

"What I want to tell you, Lee—" She seemed summoning all her last remaining strength. "Your grandfather didn't die. He just went away. What you've never known—he was a scientist. But he was a lot more than that. He had—dreams. Dreams of what we mortals might be—what we ought to be—but are not. And so he—went away."

This dying old woman; her mind was wandering?...

"Oh—yes," Lee said. "But you're much too tired now, Anna dear—"

"Please let me tell you. He had—some scientific apparatus. I didn't see it—I don't know where he went. I think he didn't know either, where he was going. But he was a very good man, Lee. I think he had an intuition—an inspiration. Yes, it must have been that. A man—inspired. And so he went. I've never seen or heard from him since. Yet—what he promised me—if he could accomplish it—tonight—almost now, Lee, would be the time—"

Just a desperately sick old woman whose blurred mind was seeing visions. The thin wrinkled face, like crumpled white parchment, was transfigured as though by a vision. Her sunken eyes were bright with it. A wonderment stirred within Lee Anthony. Why was his heart pounding? It seemed suddenly as though he must be sharing this unknown thing of science—and mysticism. As

though something within him—his grandfather's blood perhaps—was responding.... He felt suddenly wildly excited.

"Tonight?" he murmured.

"Your grandfather was a very good man, Lee—"

"And you, Anna—all my life I have known how good you are. Not like most women—you're just all gentleness—just kindness—"

"That was maybe—just an inspiration from him." Her face was bright with it. "I've tried to bring you up—the way he told me. And what I must tell you now—about tonight, I mean—because I may not live to see it—"

Her breath gave out so that her faint tired voice trailed away.

"What?" he urged. "What is it, Anna? About tonight—"

What a tumult of weird excitement was within him! Surely this was something momentous. His twenty-first birthday. Different, surely, for Lee Anthony than any similar event had ever been for anyone else.

"He promised me—when you were twenty-one—just then—at this time, if he could manage it—that he would come back—"

"Come back, Anna? Here?"

"Yes. To you and me. Because you would be a man—brought up, the best I could do to make you be—like him—because you would be a man who would know the value of love—and kindness—those things that ought to rule this world—but really do not."

This wild, unreasoning excitement within him...! "You think he will come—tonight, Anna?"

"I really do. I want to live to see him. But now—I don't know—"

He could only sit in silence, gripping her hand. And again the gay voices of his guests downstairs came up like a roar of intrusion. They didn't know that she was more than indisposed. She had made him promise not to tell them.

Her eyes had closed, and now she opened them again. "They're having a good time, aren't they, Lee? That's what I wanted—for you and them both. You see, I've had to be careful—not to isolate you from life—life as it is. Because your grandfather wanted you to be normal—a healthy, happy—regular young man. Not queer—even though I've tried to show you—"

"If he—he's coming tonight, Anna—we shouldn't have guests here."

"When they have had their fun—"

"They have. We're about finished down there. I'll get rid of them—tell them you're not very well—"

She nodded. "Perhaps that's best—now—"

He was hardly aware of how he broke up the party and sent them away. Then in the sudden heavy silence of the little cottage, here in the grove of trees near the edge of the town, he went quietly back upstairs.

Her eyes were closed. Her white face was placid. Her faint breath was barely discernible. Failing fast now. Quietly he sat beside her. There was nothing that he could do. The doctor had said that very probably she could not

live through the night. Poor old Anna. His mind rehearsed the life that she had given him. Always she had been so gentle, so wise, ruling him with kindness.

He remembered some of the things she had reiterated so often that his childish mind had come to realize their inevitable truth. The greatest instinctive desire of every living creature is happiness. And the way to get it was not by depriving others of it. It seemed now as though this old woman had had something of goodness inherent to her—as though she were inspired? And tonight she had said, with her gentle smile as she lay dying, that if that were so—it had been an inspiration from his grandfather.

Something of science which his grandfather had devised, and which had enabled him to—go away. What could that mean? Go where? And why had he gone? To seek an ideal? Because he was dissatisfied with life here? Her half incoherent words had seemed to imply that. And now, because Lee was twenty-one—a man—his grandfather was coming back. Because he had thought that Lee would be able to help him?... Help him to do—what?

He stirred in his chair. It was nearly midnight now. The little cottage—this little second floor bedroom where death was hovering—was heavy with brooding silence. It was awesome; almost frightening. He bent closer to the bed. Was she dead? No, there was still a faint fluttering breath, but it seemed now that there would be no strength for her to speak to him again.

Mysterious business, this passing on. Her eyelids were closed, a symbol of drawn blinds of the crumbling old house in which she had lived for so long. It was almost a tenantless house now. And yet she was somewhere down there behind those drawn blinds. Reluctant perhaps to leave, still she lingered, with the fires going out so that it must be cold ... cold and silent where she huddled. Or was she hearing now the great organ of the Beyond with its sweep of harmonies summoning her to come—welcoming her....

A shiver ran through young Lee Anthony as he saw that the pallid bloodless lips of the white wrinkled face had stirred into a smile. Down there somewhere her spirit—awed and a little frightened doubtless—had opened some door to let the sound of the organ in—and to let in the great riot of color which must have been outside.... And then she had not been frightened, but eager....

He realized suddenly that he was staring at an empty shell and that old Anna Green had gone....

A sound abruptly brought Lee out of his awed thoughts. It was outside the house—the crunching of wheels in the gravel of the driveway—the squeal of grinding brakes. A car had stopped. He sat erect in his chair, stiffened, listening, with his heart pounding so that the beat of it seemed to shake his tense body. His grandfather—returning?

An automobile horn honked. Footsteps sounded on the verandah. The front doorbell rang.

There were voices outside as he crossed the living room—a man's voice, and then a girl's laugh. He flung open the door. It was a young man in dinner clothes and a tall blonde girl. Tom Franklin, and a vivid, theatrical-looking girl, whom Lee had never seen before. She was inches taller than her companion. She stood clinging to his arm; her beautiful face, with beaded lashes and heavily rouged lips, was laughing. She was swaying; her companion steadied her, but he was swaying himself.

"Easy, Viv," he warned. "We made it—tol' you we would.... Hello there, Lee ol' man—your birthday—think I'd forget a thing like that, not on your life. So we come t'celebrate—meet Vivian Lamotte—frien' o' mine. Nice kid, Viv—you'll like her."

"Hello," the girl said. She stared up at Lee. He towered above her, and beside him the undersized and stoop-shouldered Franklin was swaying happily. Admiration leaped into the girl's eyes.

"Say," she murmured, "you sure are a swell looker for a fact. He said you were—but my Gawd—"

"And his birthday too," Frank agreed, "so we're gonna celebrate—" His slack-jawed, weak-chinned face radiated happiness and triumph. "Came fas' to get here in time. I tol' Viv I could make it—we never hit a thing—"

"Why, yes—come in," Lee agreed awkwardly. He had only met young Tom Franklin once or twice, a year ago now, and Lee had completely forgotten it. The son of a rich man, with more money than was good for him.... With old Anna lying there upstairs—surely he did not want these happy inebriated guests here now....

He stood with them just inside the threshold. "I—I'm awfully sorry," he began. "My birthday—yes, but you see—old Mrs. Green—my guardian—just all the family I've got—she died, just a few minutes ago—upstairs here—I've been here alone with her—"

It sobered them. They stared blankly. "Say, my Gawd, that's tough," the girl murmured. "Your birthday too. Tommy listen, we gotta get goin'—can't celebrate—"

It seemed that there was just a shadow out on the dark verandah. A tall figure in a dark cloak.

"Why—what the hell," Franklin muttered.

A group of gliding soundless figures were out there in the darkness. And across the living room the window sash went up with a thump. A black shape was there, huddled in a great loose cloak which was over the head so that the thing inside was shapeless.

For an instant Lee and his two companions stood stricken. The shapes seemed babbling with weird unintelligible words. Then from the window came words of English:

"We—want—" Slow words, strangely intoned. Young Tom Franklin broke in on them.

"Say—what the devil—who do you people think you are, comin' in here—" He took a swaying step over the threshold. There was a sudden sharp com-

mand from one of the shapes. Lee jumped in front of the girl. On the verandah the gliding figures were engulfing Franklin; he had fallen.

Lee went through the door with a leap, his fist driving at the cowled head of one of the figures—a solid shape that staggered backward from his blow. But the others were on him, dropping down before his rush, gripping his legs and ankles. He went down, fighting. And then something struck his face—something that was like a hand, or a paw with claws that scratched him. His head suddenly was reeling; his senses fading....

How long he fought Lee did not know. He was aware that the girl was screaming—and that he was hurling clutching figures away—figures that came pouncing back. Then the roaring in his head was a vast uproar. The fighting, scrambling dark shapes all seemed dwindling until they were tiny points of white light—like stars in the great abyss of nothingness....

He knew—as though it were a blurred dream—that he was lying inert on the verandah, with Franklin and the girl lying beside him.... The house was being searched.... Then the muttering shapes were standing here. Lee felt himself being picked up. And then he was carried silently out into the darkness. The motion seemed to waft him off so that he knew nothing more.

CHAPTER 2

The Flight Into Size and Space

Lee came back to consciousness with the feeling that some great length of time must have elapsed. He was on a couch in a small, weird-looking metal room—metal of a dull, grey-white substance like nothing he had ever seen before. With his head still swimming he got up dizzily on one elbow, trying to remember what had happened to him. That fingernail, or claw, had scratched his face. He had been drugged. It seemed obvious. He could remember his roaring senses as he had tried to fight, with the drug gradually overcoming him....

The room had a small door, and a single round window, like a bullseye pane of thick lens. Outside there was darkness, with points of stars. His head was still humming from the remaining effect of the drug. Or was the humming an outside noise? He was aware as he got to his feet and staggered to the door, that the humming was distantly outside the room. The door was locked; its lever resisted his efforts to turn it.

There he saw the inert figures of the girl, and Tom Franklin. They were lying uninjured on two other small couches against the room's metal wall. The girl stirred a little as he touched her dank forehead. Her dyed blonde hair had fallen disheveled to her shoulders. Franklin lay sprawled, his stiff white shirt bosom dirty and rumpled, his thin sandy hair dangling over his flushed face. His slack mouth was open. He was breathing heavily.

At the lens-window Lee stood gasping, his mind still confused and blurred, trying to encompass what was out there. This was a spaceship! A small globular thing of white metal. He could see a rim of it, like a flat ring some ten feet be-

neath him. A spaceship, and obviously it had left the Earth! There was a black firmament—dead-black monstrous abyss with white blazing points of stars. And then, down below and to one side there was just an edge of a great globe visible. The Earth, with the sunlight edging its sweeping crescent limb—the Earth, down there with a familiar coastline and a huge spread of ocean like a giant map in monochrome.

Back on the couch Lee sat numbed. There was the sound of scraping metal; a doorslide in the wall opened. A face was there—a man with a blur of opalescent light behind him.

"You are all right now?" a voice said.

"Yes. I guess so. Let me out of here..."

Let him out of here? To do what? To make them head this thing back to Earth.... To Lee Anthony as he sat confused, the very thoughts were a fantasy.... Off the Earth! Out in Space! So often he had read of it, as a future scientific possibility—but with this actuality now his mind seemed hardly to grasp it....

The man's voice said gently, "We cannot trust you. There must be no fighting—"

"I won't fight. What good could it do me?"

"You did fight. That was bad—that was frightening. We must not harm you—"

"Where are we going?" Lee murmured. "Why in the devil are you—"

"We think now it is best to say nothing. We will give you food through here. And over there—behind you—a little doorslide to another room. You and these other two can be comfortable—"

"For how long?" Lee demanded.

"It should not seem many days. Soon we shall go fast. Please watch it at the window—he would want that. You have been taught some science?"

"Yes. I guess so."

To Lee it was a weird, unnatural exchange between captor and captive. The voice, intoning the English words so slowly, so carefully, seemed gentle, concerned with his welfare ... and afraid of him.

Abruptly the doorslide closed again, and then at once it reopened.

"He would want you to understand what you see," the man said. "You will find it very wonderful—we did, coming down here. This was his room—so long ago when he used it. His dials are there—you can watch them and try to understand. Dials to mark our distance and our size. The size-change will start soon."

Size-change? Lee's numbed mind turned over the words and found them almost meaningless.

"From the window there—what you can see will be very wonderful," the man said again. "He would want you to study it. Please do that."

The doorslide closed....

What you can see from the window will be very wonderful. No one, during the days that followed could adequately describe what Lee Anthony and Thomas Franklin and Vivian saw through that lens-window. A vast panorama in mono-

chrome ... a soundless drama of the stars, so immense, so awesome that the human mind could grasp only an infinitesimal fragment of its wonders....

They found the little door which led into another apartment. There were tables and chairs of earth-style, quaintly old-fashioned. Food and drink were shoved through the doorslide; the necessities of life and a fair comfort of living were provided. But their questions, even as the time passed and lengthened into what on Earth might have been a week or more, remained unanswered. There was only that gentle but firm negation:

"We have decided that he would want us to say nothing. We do not know about this girl and this smaller man. We brought them so that they could not remain on Earth to talk of having seen us. We are sorry about that. He probably won't like it."

"He? Who the devil are you talking about?" Franklin demanded. "See here, if I had you fellows back on Earth now I'd slam you into jail. Damned brigands. You can't do this to me! My—my father's one of the most important men in New York—"

But now the doorslide quietly closed.

A week? It could have been that, or more. In a wall recess of the room Lee found a line of tiny dials with moving pointers. Miles—thousands of miles. A million; ten millions; a hundred million. A light-year; tens, thousands. And, for the size-change, a normal diameter, Unit 1—and then up into thousands.

For hours at a time, silent, awed beyond what he had ever conceived the emotion of awe could mean, he sat at the lens-window, staring out and trying to understand.

The globe-ship was some five-hundred thousand miles out from Earth when the size-change of the weird little vehicle began. It came to Lee with a sudden shock to his senses, his head reeling, and a tingling within him as though every fibre of his being were suddenly stimulated into a new activity.

"Well, my Gawd," Vivian gasped. "What're they doin' to us now?"

The three of them had been warned by a voice through the doorslide, so that they sat together on one of the couches, waiting for what would happen.

"This—I wish they wouldn't do it," Franklin muttered. "Damn them—I want to get out of here."

Fear seemed to be Franklin's chief emotion now—fear and a petty sense of personal outrage that all this could be done to him against his will. Often, when Lee and the girl were at the window, Franklin had sat brooding, staring at his feet.

"Easy," Lee said. "It evidently won't hurt us. We're started in size-change. The globe, and everything in it, is getting larger."

Weird. The grey metal walls of the room were glowing now with some strange current which suffused them. The starlight from the window-lens mingled with an opalescent sheen from the glowing walls. It was like an aura, bathing the room—an aura which

seemed to penetrate every smallest cell-particle of Lee's body—stimulating it....

Size-change! Vaguely, Lee could fathom how it was accomplished; his mind went back to many scientific articles he had read on the theory of it—only theory, those imaginative scientific pedants had considered it; and now it was a reality upon him! He recalled the learned phrases the writers had used.... The state of matter. In all the Universe, the inherent factors which govern the state of matter yield most readily to a change. An electronic charge—a current perhaps akin to, but certainly not identical with electricity, would change the state of all organic and inorganic substances ... a rapid duplication of the fundamental entities within the electrons—and electrons themselves, so unsubstantial—mere whirlpools of nothingness!

A rapid duplication of the fundamental whirlpools—that would add size. The complete substance—with shape unaltered—would grow larger.

All just theory, but here, now, it was brought to an accomplished fact. Within himself, Lee could feel it. But as yet, he could not see it. The glowing room and everything in it was so weirdly luminous, there was no alteration in shape. These objects, the figure of Vivian beside him, and the pallid frightened Franklin, relative to each other they were no different from before. And the vast panorama of starry Universe beyond the lens-window, the immense distances out there, made any size-change as yet unperceivable.

But the size-change had begun, there was no question of it. With his senses steadying, Lee crossed the room. A weird feeling of lightness was upon him; he swayed as he stood before the little line of dials in the wall-recess. Five hundred thousand miles from Earth. More than twice the distance of the Moon. The globe had gone that far with accelerating velocity so that now the pointers marked a hundred thousand miles an hour—out beyond the Moon, heading for the orbit-line of Mars. Now the size-change pointers were stirring. Unit One, the size this globe had been as it rested on Earth, fifty feet in height, and some thirty feet at its midsection bulge. Already that unit was two, a globe—which, if it were on Earth, would be a hundred feet high. And Lee himself? He would be a giant more than twelve feet tall now.... He stood staring at the dials for a moment or two. That little pointer of the first of the size-change dials was creeping around. An acceleration! Another moment and it had touched Unit four. A two hundred foot globe. And Lee, if he had been on Earth, would already be a towering human nearly twenty-five feet in height!

Behind him, he heard Franklin suddenly muttering, "If only I could change without everything else changing! Damn them all—what I could do—"

"You're nuts," Vivian said. "I don't see anything growing bigger—everything here—jus' the same." Her laugh was abruptly hysterical. "This room—you two—you look like ghosts. Say, maybe we're all dead an' don't know it."

Queerly her words sent a shiver

through Lee. He turned, stared blankly at her. This weird thing! The electronic light streaming from these walls had a stroboscopic quality. The girl's face was greenish, putty-colored, and her teeth shone phosphorescent.

Maybe we're all dead and don't know it.... Lee knew that this thing was a matter of cold, precise, logical science.... Yet who shall say but what mysticism is not mingled with science? A thing, which if we understood it thoroughly, would be as logical, as precise as the mathematics of science itself? Death? Who shall say what, of actuality, Death may be. A leaving of the mortal shell? A departure from earthly substance? A new state of being? Surely some of those elements were here now. And, logically, why could there not be a state of being not all Death, but only with some of its elements?

"I—I don't like this," Franklin suddenly squealed. On the couch he sat hunched, trembling. "Something wrong here—Lee—damn you Lee—don't you feel it?"

Lee tried to smile calmly. "Feel what?"

"We're not—not alone here," Franklin stammered. "Not just you and Vivian and me—something else is here—something you can't see, but you can almost feel. An' I don't like it—"

A presence. Was there indeed something else here, of which now in this new state of being they were vaguely aware? Something—like a fellow voyager—making this weird journey with them? Lee's heart was so wildly beating that it seemed smothering him.

Unit Ten ... Twenty ... a Hundred.... With steady acceleration, the lowest size-change pointer was whirling, and the one above it was moving. The globe was five thousand feet high now. And on Earth Lee would have been a monstrous Titan over six hundred feet tall. A globe, and humans in that tremendous size—the very weight of them—in a moment more of this growth—would disarrange the rotation of the Earth on its axis!...

And then abruptly Lee found himself envisaging the monstrous globe out here in Space. A thing to disarrange the mechanics of all the Celestial Universe! In an hour or two, with this acceleration of growth, the globe would be a huge meteorite—then an asteroid....

He stared at the distance dials. With the growth had come an immense augmentation of velocity. A hundred thousand miles an hour—that had been accelerated a hundred fold now. Ten million miles an hour.... Through the window-lens Lee gazed, mute with awe. The size-change was beginning to show! Far down, and to one side the crescent Earth was dwindling ... Mars was far away in another portion of its orbit—the Moon was behind the Earth. There were just the myriad blazing giant worlds of the stars—infinitely remote, with vast distances of inky void between them. And now there was a visible movement to the stars! A sort of shifting movement....

An hour.... A day.... A week.... Who shall try and describe what Lee Anthony beheld during that weird outward journey?... For a brief time, after they swept

past the orbit of Mars, the great planets of Jupiter and Saturn were almost in a line ahead of the plunging, expanding globe. A monstrous thing now—with electronically charged gravity-plates so that it plunged onward by its own repellant force—the repellant force of the great star-field beneath it.

Lee stared at Jupiter, a lead-colored world with its red spot like a monster's single glaring eye. With the speed of light Jupiter was advancing, swinging off to one side with a visible flow of movement, and dropping down into the lower void as the globe went past it. Yet, as it approached, visually it had not grown larger. Instead, there was only a steady dwindling. A dwindling of great Saturn, with its gorgeous, luminous rings came next. These approaching planets, seeming to shrink! Because, with Lee's expanding viewpoint, everything in the vast scene was shrinking! Great distances here, in relation to the giant globe, were dwindling! These millions of miles between Saturn and Jupiter had shrunk into thousands. And then were shrinking to hundreds.

Abruptly, with a startled shock to his senses, Lee's viewpoint changed. Always before he had instinctively conceived himself to be his normal six foot earthly size. The starry Universe was vast beyond his conception. And in a second now, that abruptly was altered. He conceived the vehicle as of actuality it was—a globe as large as the ball of Saturn itself! And simultaneously he envisaged the present reality of Saturn. Out in the inky blackness it hung—not a giant ringed world millions of miles away, but only a little ringed ball no bigger than the spaceship—a ringed ball only eight or ten times as big as Lee himself. It hung there for an instant beside them—only a mile or so away perhaps. And as it went past, with both distance and size-change combining now, it shrank with amazing rapidity! A ball only as big as this room.... Then no larger than Lee it hung, still seemingly no further away than before. And then in a few minutes more, a mile out there in the shrinking distance, it was a tiny luminous point, vanishing beyond his vision.

Uranus, little Neptune—Pluto, almost too far away in its orbit to be seen—all of them presently were dwindled and gone. Lee had a glimpse of the Solar system, a mere bunch of lights. The Sun was a tiny spot of light, holding its little family of tiny planets—a mother hen with her brood. It was gone in a moment, lost like a speck of star-dust among the giant starry worlds.

Another day—that is a day as it would have been on Earth. But here was merely a progressing of human existence—a streaming forward of human consciousness. The Light-year dial pointers were all in movement. By Earth standards of size and velocity, long since had the globe's velocity reached and passed the speed of light. Lee had been taught—his book-learning colored by the Einstein postulates—that there could be no speed greater than the speed of light—by Earth standards—perhaps, yes. The globe—by comparison with its original fifty-foot earth-size—might still be traveling no

more than a few hundred thousand miles an hour. But this monster—a thing now as big as the whole Solar System doubtless—was speeding through a light-year in a moment!

Futile figures! The human mind can grasp nothing of the vastness of inter-stellar space. To Lee it was only a shrinking inky void—an emptiness crowded with whirling little worlds all dwindling.... This crowded space! Often little points of star-dust had come whirling at the globe—colliding, bursting into pin-points of fire. Each of them might have been bigger than the Earth.

There was a time when it seemed that beneath the globe all the tiny stars were shrinking into one lens-shaped cluster. The Inter-stellar Universe—all congealed down there into a blob, and everywhere else there was just nothingness.... But then little distant glowing nebulae were visible—luminous, floating rings, alone in the emptiness.... Distant? One of them drifted past, seemingly only a few hundred feet away—a luminous little ring of star-dust. The passage of the monstrous globe seemed to hurl it so that like a blown smoke ring it went into chaos, lost its shape, and vanished.

Then at last all the blobs—each of them, to Earth-size conception, a monstrous Universe—all were dwindled into one blob down to one side of Lee's window. And then they were gone....

Just darkness now. Darkness and soundless emptiness. But as he stared at intervals through another long night of his human consciousness, Lee seemed to feel that the emptiness out there was dwindling—a finite emptiness. He noticed, presently, that the size-change pointers had stopped their movement; the ultimate size of the globe had been reached. The figures of the Light-year dials were meaningless to his comprehension. The velocity was meaningless. And now another little set of dials were in operation. A thousand—something—of distance. There was a meaningless word which named the unit. A thousand Earth-miles, if he had been in his former size? The pointer marked nine hundred in a moment. Was it, perhaps, the distance now from their destination?

Vivian was beside him. "Lee, what's gonna happen to us? Won't this come to an end some time? Lee—you won't let anybody hurt me?"

She was like a child, almost always clinging to him now. And suddenly she said a very strange thing. "Lee, I been thinkin'—back there on Earth I was doin' a lot of things that maybe were pretty rotten—anglin' for his money for instance—an' not carin' much what I had to do to get it." She gestured at the sullen Franklin who was sitting on the couch. "You know—things like that. An' I been thinkin'—you suppose, when we get where we're goin' now, that'll be held against me?"

What a queer thing to say! She was like a child—and so often a child has an insight into that which is hidden from those more mature!

"I—don't know," Lee muttered.

From the couch, Franklin looked up

moodily. "Whispering about me again? I know you are—damn you both. You and everybody else here."

"We're not interested in you," Vivian said.

"Oh, you're not? Well you were, back on Earth. I'm not good enough for you now, eh? He's better—because he's big—big and strong—that the idea? Well if I ever had the chance—"

"Don't be silly," Lee said.

The sullen Franklin was working himself into a rage. Lee seemed to understand Franklin better now. A weakling. Inherently, with a complex of inferiority, the vague consciousness of it lashing him into baffled anger.

"You, Anthony," Franklin burst out, "don't think you've been fooling me. You can put it over that fool girl, but not me. I'm onto you."

"Put what over?" Lee said mildly.

"That you don't know anything about this affair or these men who've got us—you don't know who they are, do you?"

"No. Do you?" Lee asked.

Franklin jumped to his feet. "Don't fence with me. By God, if I was bigger I'd smash your head in. They abducted us, because they wanted you. That fellow said as much near the start of this damned trip. They won't talk—afraid I'll find out. And you can't guess what it's all about! The hell you can't."

Lee said nothing. But there was a little truth in what Franklin was saying, of course.... Those things that the dying old Anna Green had told him—surely this weird voyage had some connection.

He turned away; went back to the window. There was a sheen now. A vague outline of something vast, as though the darkness were ending at a great wall that glowed a little.

It seemed, during the next time-interval, as though the globe might have turned over, so that now it was dropping down upon something tangible. Dropping—floating down—with steadily decreasing velocity, descending to a Surface. The sheen of glow had expanded until now it filled all the lower hemisphere of darkness—a great spread of surface visually coming up. Then there were things to see, illumined by a faint half-light to which color was coming; a faint, pastel color that seemed a rose-glow.

"Why—why," Vivian murmured, "say, it's beautiful, ain't it? It looks like fairyland—or Heaven. It does—don't it, Lee?"

"Yes," Lee murmured. "Like—like—"

The wall-slide rasped. The voice of one of their captors said, "We will arrive soon. We can trust you—there must be no fighting?"

"You can trust us," Lee said.

It was dark in the little curving corridor of the globe, where with silent robed figures around them, they stood while the globe gently landed. Then they were pushed forward, out through the exit port.

The new realm. The World Beyond. What was it? To Lee Anthony then came the feeling that there was a precise scientific explanation of it, of course. And

yet, beyond all that pedantry of science, he seemed to know that it was something else, perhaps a place that a man might mould by his dreams. A place that would be what a man made of it, from that which was within himself.

Solemn with awe he went with his companions slowly down the incline.

CHAPTER 3

Realm of Mystery

"We wish nothing of you," the man said, "save that you accept from us what we have to offer. You are hungry. You will let us bring you food."

It was a simple rustic room to which they had been brought—a room in a house seemingly of plaited straw. Crude furnishings were here—table and chairs of Earth fashion, padded with stuffed mats. Woven matting was on the floor. Through a broad latticed window the faint rose-light outside—like a soft pastel twilight—filtered in, tinting the room with a gentle glow. Thin drapes at the window stirred in a breath of breeze—a warm wind from the hills, scented with the vivid blooms which were everywhere.

It had been a brief walk from the space-globe. Lee had seen what seemed a little village stretching off among the trees. There had been people crowding to see the strangers—men, women and children, in simple crude peasant garb—brief garments that revealed their pink-white bodies. They babbled with strange unintelligible words, crowding forward until the robed men from the globe shoved them away.

It was a pastoral, peaceful scene—a little country-side drowsing in the warm rosy twilight. Out by the river there were fields where men stood at their simple agricultural implements—stood at rest, staring curiously at the commotion in the village.

And still Lee's captors would say nothing, merely drew them forward, into this room. Then all of them left, save one. He had doffed his robe now. He was an old man, with long grey-white hair to the base of his neck. He stood smiling. His voice, with the English words queerly pronounced, was gentle, but with a firm finality of command.

"My name is Arkoh," he said. "I am to see that you are made comfortable. This house is yours. There are several rooms, so that you may do in them as you wish."

"Thank you," Lee said. "But you can certainly understand—I have asked many questions and never had any answers. If you wish to talk to me alone—"

"That will come presently. There is no reason for you to be worried—"

"We're not worried," Franklin burst out. "We're fed up with this highhanded stuff. You'll answer questions now. What I demand to know is why—"

"Take it easy," Lee warned.

Franklin had jumped to his feet. He flung off Lee's hand. "Don't make me laugh. I know you're one of them—everything about you is a fake. You got us into this—"

"So? You would bring strife here from your Earth?" Arkoh's voice cut in, like a knife-blade cleaving through

Franklin's bluster. "That is not permissible. Please do not make it necessary that there should be violence here." He stood motionless. But before his gaze Franklin relaxed into an incoherent muttering.

"Thank you," Arkoh said. "I shall send you the food." He turned and left the room.

Vivian collapsed into a chair. She was trembling. "Well—my Gawd—what is all this? Lee—that old man with his gentle voice—he looked like if you crossed him you'd be dead. Not that he'd hurt you—it would be—would be something else—"

"You talk like an ass," Franklin said. "You've gone crazy—and I don't blame you—this damned weird thing. For all that old man's smooth talk, we're just prisoners here. Look outside that window—"

It was a little garden, drowsing in the twilight. A man stood watching the window. And as Lee went to the lattice, he could see others, like guards outside.

The man who brought their simple food was a stalwart fellow in a draped garment of brown plaited fibre. His black hair hung thick about his ears. He laid out the food in silence.

"What's your name?" Franklin demanded.

"I am Groff."

"And you won't talk either, I suppose? Look here, I can make it worth your while to talk."

"Everyone has all he needs here. There is nothing that you need give us."

"Isn't there? You just give me a chance and I'll show you. No one has all he needs—or all he wants."

Groff did not answer. But as he finished placing the food, and left the room, it seemed to Lee that he shot a queer look back at Franklin. A look so utterly incongruous that it was startling. Franklin saw it and chuckled.

"Well, at least there's one person here who's not so damn weird that it gives you the creeps."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Lee said. With sudden impulse he lowered his voice. "Franklin, listen—there are a few things that perhaps I can tell you. Things that I can guess—that Vivian senses—"

"I don't want to hear your explanation. It would be just a lot of damn lies anyway."

"All right. Perhaps it would. We'll soon know, I imagine."

"Let's eat," Vivian said. "I'm hungry, even if I am scared."

To Lee it seemed that the weird mystery here was crowding upon them. As though, here in this dim room, momentous things were waiting to reveal themselves. A strange emotion was upon Lee Anthony. A sort of tense eagerness. Certainly it was not fear. Certainly it seemed impossible that there could be anything here of which he should be afraid. Again his mind went back to old Anna Green and what she had told him of his grandfather. How far away—how long ago that had been.... And yet, was Anna Green far away now? Something of her had seemed always to be with him on that long, weird voyage, from the infinite

smallness and pettiness of Earth to this realm out beyond the stars. And more than ever now, somehow Lee seemed aware of her presence here in this quiet room. Occultism? He had always told himself that surely he was no mystic. A practical fellow, who could understand science when it was taught him, but certainly never could give credence to mysticism. The dead are dead, and the living are alive; and between them is a gulf—an abyss of nothingness.

Now he found himself wondering. Were all those people on Earth who claimed to feel the presence of dead loved ones near them? Were those people just straining their fancy—just comforting themselves with what they wished to believe? Or was the scoffer himself the fool? And if that could be so, on Earth, why could not this strange realm be of such a quality that an awareness of those who have passed from life would be the normal thing? Who shall say that the mysteries of life and death are unscientific? Was it not rather that they embraced those gaps of science not yet understood? Mysteries which, if only we could understand them, would be mysteries no longer?

Lee had left the table and again was standing at the latticed window, beyond which the drowsing little garden lay silent, and empty now. The guard who had been out here had moved further away; his figure was a blob near a flowered thicket at the house corner. And suddenly Lee was aware of another figure. There was a little splashing fountain near the garden's center—a rill of water which came down a little embankment and splashed into a pool where the rose light shimmered on the ripples.

The figure was sitting at the edge of the pool—a slim young girl in a brief dress like a drape upon her. She sat, half reclining on the bank by the shimmering water, with her long hair flowing down over her shoulders and a lock of it trailing in the pool. For a moment he thought that she was gazing into the water. Then as the light which tinted her graceful form seemed to intensify, he saw that she was staring at him.

It seemed as though both of them, for that moment, were breathless with a strange emotion awakened in them by the sight of each other. And then slowly the girl rose to her feet. Still gazing at Lee, she came slowly forward with her hair dangling, framing her small oval face. The glow in the night-air tinted her features. It was a face of girlhood, almost mature—a face with wonderment on it now.

He knew that he was smiling; then, a few feet from the window she stopped and said shyly:

"You are Lee Anthony?"

"Yes."

"I am Aura. When you have finished eating, I am to take you to him."

"To him?"

"Yes. The One of Our Guidance. He bade me bring you." Her soft voice was musical; to her, quite obviously, the English was a foreign tongue.

"I'm ready," Lee said. "I'm finished."

One of her slim bare arms went up with a gesture. From the corner of the

little house the guard there turned, came inside. Lee turned to the room. The guard entered. "You are to come," he said.

"So we just stay here, prisoners," Franklin muttered. He and Vivian were blankly staring as Lee was led away.

Then in a moment he was alone beside the girl who had come for him. Silently they walked out into the glowing twilight, along a little woodland path with the staring people and the rustic, nestling dwellings blurring in the distance behind them. A little line of wooded hills lay ahead. The sky was like a dark vault—empty. The pastel light on the ground seemed inherent to the trees and the rocks; it streamed out like a faint radiation from everywhere. And then, as Lee gazed up into the abyss of the heavens, suddenly it seemed as though very faintly he could make out a tiny patch of stars. Just one small cluster, high overhead.

"The Universe you came from," Aura said.

"Yes." The crown of her tresses as she walked beside him was at his shoulder. He gazed down at her. "To whom are you taking me? It seems that I could guess—"

"I was told not to talk of that."

"Well, all right. Is it far?"

"No. A little walk—just to that nearest hill."

Again they were silent. "My Earth," he said presently, "do you know much about it?"

"A little. I have been told."

"It seems so far away to me now."

She gazed up at him. She was smiling. "Is it? To me it seems quite close." She gestured. "Just up there. It seemed far to you, I suppose—that was because you were so small, for so long, coming here."

Like a man the size of an ant, trying to walk ten miles. Of course, it would be a monstrous trip. But if that man were steadily to grow larger, as he progressed he would cover the distance very quickly.

"Well," Lee said, "I suppose I can understand that. You were born here, Aura?"

"Yes. Of course."

"Your world here—what is it like?"

She gazed up at him as though surprised. "You have seen it. It is just a simple little place. We have not so many people here in the village, and about that many more—those who live in the hills close around here."

"You mean that's all? Just this village? Just a few thousand people?"

"Oh there are others, of course. Other groups—like ours, I guess—out in the forests—everywhere in all the forests, maybe." Her gesture toward the distant, glowing, wooded horizons was vague. "We have never tried to find out. Why should we? Wherever they are, they have all that they need or want. So have we."

The thing was so utterly simple. He pondered it. "And you—you're very happy here?"

Her wide eyes were childlike. "Why yes. Of course. Why not? Why should not everyone be happy?"

"Well," he said, "there are things..."

"Yes. I have heard of them. Things on your Earth—which the humans create for themselves—but that is very silly. We do not have them here."

Surely he could think of no retort to such childlike faith. Her faith. How horribly criminal it would be to destroy it. A priceless thing—human happiness to be created out of the faith that it was the normal thing. He realized that his heart was pounding, as though now things which had been dormant within him all his life were coming out—clamoring now for recognition.

And then, out of another silence he murmured, "Aura—you're taking me to my grandfather, aren't you? He came here from Earth—and then he sent back there to get me?"

"Yes," she admitted. "So you know it? But I was instructed to—"

"All right. We won't talk of it. And he's told you about me?"

"Yes," she agreed shyly. She caught her breath as she added, "I have been—waiting for you—a long time." Shyly she gazed up at him. The night-breeze had blown her hair partly over her face. Her hand brushed it away so that her gaze met his. "I hoped you would be, well, like you are," she added.

"Oh," he said awkwardly. "Well—thanks."

"And you," she murmured out of another little silence, "you—I hope I haven't disappointed you. I am the way you want—like you wished—"

What a weird thing to say! He smiled. "Not ever having heard of you, Aura, I can't exactly say that I—"

He checked himself. Was she what he had wished? Why yes—surely he had been thinking of her—in his dreams, all his life vaguely picturing something like this for Lee Anthony....

"I guess I have been thinking of you," he agreed. "No, you haven't disappointed me, Aura. You—you are—"

He could find no words to say it. "We are almost there," she said. "He will be very happy to have you come. He is a very good man, Lee. The one, we think, of the most goodness—and wiseness, to guide us all—"

The path had led them up a rocky defile, with gnarled little trees growing between the crags. Ahead, the hillside rose up in a broken, rocky cliff. There was a door, like a small tunnel entrance. A woman in a long white robe was by the door.

"He is here," Aura said. "Young Anthony."

"You go in."

Silently they passed her. The tunnel entrance glowed with the pastel radiance from the rocks. The radiance was a soft blob of color ahead of them.

"You will find that he cannot move now," Aura whispered. "You will sit by his bed. And talk softly."

"You mean—he's ill?"

"Well—what you would call paralysis. He cannot move. Only his lips—his eyes. He will be gone from us soon, so that then he can only be unseen. A Visitor—"

Her whisper trailed off. Lee's heart was pounding, seeming to thump in his

throat as Aura led him silently forward. It was a draped, cave-like little room. Breathless, Lee stared at a couch—a thin old figure lying there—a frail man with white hair that framed his wrinkled face. It was a face that was smiling, its sunken, burning eyes glowing with a new intensity. The lips moved; a faint old voice murmured:

"And you—you are Lee?"

"Yes—grandfather—"

He went slowly forward and sat on the bedside.

CHAPTER 4

Mad Giant

To Lee, after a moment, his grandfather seemed not awe-inspiring, but just a frail old man, paralyzed into almost complete immobility, lying here almost pathetically happy to have his grandson at last with him. An old man, with nothing of the mystic about him—an old man who had been—unknown to the savants of his Earth—perhaps the greatest scientist among them. Quietly, with pride welling in him, Lee held the wasted, numbed hand of his grandfather and listened....

Phineas Anthony, the scientist. After many years of research, spending his own private fortune, he had evolved the secret of size-change—solved the intricate problems of anti-gravitational spaceflight; and combining the two, had produced that little vehicle.

A man of science; and perhaps more than that. As old Anna Green had said, perhaps he was a man inspired—a man, following his dreams, his convictions, convinced that somewhere in God's great creation of things that are, there must be an existence freed of those things by which Man himself so often makes human life a tortured hell.

"And Something led me here, Lee," the gentle old voice was saying. "Perhaps not such a coincidence. On this great Inner Surface of gentle light and gentle warmth—with Nature offering nothing against which one must strive—there must be many groups of simple people like these. They have no thought of evil—there is nothing—no one, to teach it to them. If I had not landed here, I think I would have found much the same thing almost anywhere else on the Inner Surface."

"The Inner Surface? I don't understand, grandfather."

A conception—a reality here—that was numbing in its vastness. This was the concave, inner surface, doubtless deep within the atom of some material substance. A little empty Space here, surrounded by solidity.

"And that—" Lee murmured, "then that little space is our Inter-Stellar abyss?"

"Yes. Of course. The stars, as we call them—from here you could call them tiny particles—like electrons whirling. All of them in this little void. With good eyesight, you can sometimes see them there—"

"I did."

And to this viewpoint which Lee had now—so gigantic, compared to Earth—all the Inter-Stellar universe was a void here of what old Anthony considered would be perhaps eight or ten thousand

miles. A void, to Lee now, was itself of no greater volume than the Earth had been to him before!

Silently he pondered it. This Inner Surface—not much bigger, to him now, than the surface of the Earth is to its humans.... Suddenly he felt small—infinitely tiny. Out here beyond the stars, he was only within the atom of something larger, a human, partly on his way—emerging—outward—

It gave him a new vague conception. As though now, because he was partly emerged, the all-wise Creator was giving him a new insight. Surely in this simple form of existence humans were totally unaware of what evil could be. Was not this a higher form of life than down there on his tiny Earth?

The conception numbed him with awe....

"You see, Lee, I have been looking forward to having you become a man—to having you here," old Anthony was saying. As he lay, so utterly motionless, only his voice, his face, his eyes, seemed alive. It was an amazingly expressive old face, radiant, transfigured. "I shall not be here long. You see? And when I have—gone on—when I can only come back here as a Visitor—like Anna Green, you have been aware of her, Lee?"

"Yes, grandfather. Yes, I think I have."

"The awareness is more acute, here, than it was back on Earth. A very comforting thing, Lee. I was saying—I want you here. These people, so simple—you might almost think them childlike—they need someone to guide them. The one who did that—just as I came, was dying. Maybe—maybe that is what led me here. So now I need you."

It welled in Lee with an awe, and a feeling suddenly of humbleness—and of his own inadequacy, so that he murmured,

"But grandfather—I would do my best—but surely—"

"I think it will be given you—the ability—and I've been thinking, Lee, if only some time it might be possible to show them on Earth—"

Lee had been aware that he and old Anthony were alone here. When Lee entered, Aura had at once withdrawn. Now, interrupting his grandfather's faint, gentle voice there was a commotion outside the underground apartment. The sound of women's startled cries, and Aura's voice.

Then Aura burst in, breathless, pale, with her hair flying and on her face and in her eyes a terror so incongruous that Lee's heart went cold.

He gasped, "Aura! Aura, what is it?"

"This terrible thing—that man who came with you—that man, Franklin—he talked with Groff. Some evil spell to put upon Groff—it could only have been that—"

Lee seized her. "What do you mean? Talk slower. Groff? The man who served us that meal—"

"Yes, Groff. And two of the men who were to guard there. What that man said to them—did to them—and when old Arkoh found it out he opposed them—" Her voice was drab with stark horror—

so new an emotion that it must have confused her, so that now she just stood trembling.

"Child, come here—come here over to me—" Old Anthony's voice summoned her. "Now—talk more slowly—try and think what you want to tell us.... What happened?"

"Oh—I saw old Arkoh—him whom I love so much—who always has been so good to me—to us all—I saw him lying there on the floor—"

Words so unnatural here that they seemed to reverberate through the little cave-room with echoes that jostled and muttered like alien, menacing things which had no right here—and yet, were here.

"You saw him—lying there?" Lee prompted.

"Yes. His throat, with red blood running out of it where they had cut him—and he was dying—he died while I stood there—"

The first murder. A thing so unnatural. Old Anthony stared for an instant mute at the girl who now had covered her face with her hands as she trembled against Lee.

"Killed him?" Lee murmured.

On Anthony's face there was wonderment—disillusion, and then bitterness. "So? This is what comes to us, from Earth?"

Lying so helpless, old Anthony could only murmur that now Lee must do what he could.

"Your own judgement, my son—do what you can to meet this." The sunken, burning eyes of the old man flashed. "If there must be violence here, let it be so. Violence for that which is right."

"Grandfather—yes! That miserable cowardly murderer—"

To meet force, with force. Surely, even in a world of ideals, there is no other way.

With his fists clenched, Lee ran from the cave-room. Frightened women scattered before him at its entrance. Where had Franklin gone? That fellow Groff, and two or three of the guards had gone with him. Cynicism swept Lee; he remembered the look Groff had flung at Franklin. Even here in this realm—because it was peopled by humans—evil passions could brood. Groff indeed must have been planning something, and he had seen in Franklin a ready helper—a man from Earth, whom Groff very well may have thought would be more resourceful, more experienced in the ways of violence than himself.

This realm where everyone had all of happiness that he could want! Human perfection of existence. A savage laugh of irony was within Lee as he thought of it. No one had ever held out the offer of more than perfection to these people. But Franklin evidently had done it—playing upon the evil which must lie within every living thing, no matter how latent it may be. Awakening in those guards the passion of cupidity—desire for something better than they had now.

What had happened to Vivian? Out in the rose-light dimness, a little way down the path, Lee found himself staring off toward the forest where the village lay nestled. Voices of the fright-

ened people came wafting through the night silence.

"Lee—Lee—"

It was Aura behind him, running after him. "Lee—wait—I belong with you. You know that—"

He gripped her. "That girl from Earth—that Vivian—she was with Franklin. What happened to her?"

"She went. He took her—"

"She went—voluntarily?"

"Yes. The people saw her running out with Franklin, and Groff and the other men. Oh, Lee—what—what are you going to do?"

"I don't know." He stood for a moment dazed, confused—panting, his fingers twitching. If only he could get a grip on Franklin's throat. And so Vivian went too! That was a laugh—girl of the streets, pretty worthless, on Earth. But here—she had seemed to sense what this realm could mean.

"Aura, where would Groff be likely to go?"

"Go? Why—why I do remember, Groff often went up into the hills. He never said why?"

"Would they have any weapons?"

"Weapons?" Her eyes widened as though for a second she did not comprehend. "Weapons? You mean—instruments with which to kill people? No—how could there be? But a knife can kill. A knife cut old Arkoh's throat. We have knives—in the houses—and knives that are used for the harvests—"

She had turned to gaze out toward the glowing hills.... "Oh, Lee—look—"

Numbed, with their breath catching in their throats, they stared. Out by the hills a man's figure rose up—monstrous, gigantic figure.

Franklin! He stood beside the little hill, with a hand on its top, his huge bulk dwarfing it! Franklin, a titan, his head and shoulders looming monstrously against the inky blackness of the sky!

CHAPTER 5

Combat of Titans

"Aura, you think you know where Groff may have gone—those times he went out into the hills?"

"Yes. I think so. Lee—that giant, I think now I understand what must have happened."

The giant shape of Franklin, a mile or two from them, had stood for a moment and then had receded, vanished momentarily as he moved backward behind the hills. Lee and Aura, stunned, still stood beside the little rocky path. Lee's mind was a turmoil of confusion, with only the knowledge that he must do something now, quickly. There were no weapons here in this peaceful little realm. Four or five of these madmen villains—what need had they of weapons? The monstrous power of size. The thought of it struck at Lee with a chill that seemed turning his blood to ice. The monster that Franklin had become—with a size like that he could scatter death with his naked hands.

"I remember now," Aura was gasping. "There was a time when your grandfather was working on his science. Groff was helping him then. Your grandfather taught Groff much."

"Working at what?"

"It was never said. Then your grandfather gave it up—he had decided it would not be wise here."

Some individual apparatus, with the size-change principle of the space-globe? And Groff had gotten the secret. An abnormality here—Groff with the power of evil latent within him, tempted by this opportunity. What could he have hoped to accomplish? Of what use to him would it be to devastate this little realm? Bitter irony swept Lee. Of what use was vast personal power to anyone? Those madmen of Earth's history, with their lust for conquest—of what use could the conquest be to them? And yet they had plunged on.

He realized that with Groff there could have been a wider field of conquest. Groff had heard much of Earth. With the power of size here, he could master this realm; then seize the space-globe. Go with it to Earth. Why, in a gigantic size there, he and a few villainous companions could master the Earth-world. A mad dream indeed, but Lee knew it was a lustful possibility matched by many in Earth's history.

And then Franklin had come here. Franklin, with his knowledge of Earth which Groff would need. Franklin, with his inherent feeling of inferiority—his groping desire for the strength and power of size. What an opportunity for Franklin!

Lee heard himself saying out of the turmoil of his thoughts: "Then, Aura—out there in the hills they've got some apparatus, of course, which—"

His words were stricken away. From somewhere in the glowing dimness near at hand there was a groan. A gasping, choking groan; and the sound of something falling.

"Lee—over there—" Aura's whispered words were drab with horror.

A figure which had been staggering among the rocks near them, had fallen. They rushed to it. Vivian! She was trying to drag herself forward. Her hair, streaming down in a sodden mass, was matted with blood. Her pallid face was blood-smeared. Her neck and throat were a welter of crimson horror. Beside her on the ground lay a strange-looking apparatus of grids and wires—a metal belt—a skeleton helmet.... She was gripping it with a blood-smeared hand, dragging it with her.

"Vivian—Vivian—"

"Oh—you, Lee? Thank Gawd I got to you—"

Her elbows gave way; her head and shoulders sank to the rock. Faintly gasping, with blood-foam at her livid lips, she lay motionless. But her glazing eyes gazed up at Lee, and she was trying to smile.

"I went with them—that damned Franklin—he thought I was as bad as him—" Her faint words were barely audible as he bent down to her. "Just want to tell you, Lee—you're perfectly swell—I guess I fell for you, didn't I? That's over now—just wanted you to know it anyway. There's one of the damned mechanisms they've got—"

"Where are they, Vivian?"

"A cave, not very far from here—

down that little ravine—just ahead—they're in there—four or five of them, getting ready to—" Blood was rattling in her throat, choking her. She tried, horribly, to cough. And then she gasped:

"I stole this mechanism. He—Franklin—he caught me—slashed me. He thought I was dead, I guess—but—when he had gone, I got this mechanism—trying to get to you—"

Her choking, rattling breath again gave out. For a moment she lay with a paroxysm of death twitching her. And then, very faintly she gasped:

"Sort of nice—I was able to do one good thing—anyhow. I'm glad of that..."

The paroxysm ended in a moment. Her white lips were still trying to smile as the light went out of her eyes and she was gone. Trembling, Lee stood up, with the mute, white-faced Aura clinging to him. It was fairly obvious how the weird mechanism should be adjusted—anklets, the skeleton helmet of electrodes, the belt around his waist, with its grids, tiny dials and curved battery box. In a moment he stood with the wires strung from his head, to wrist, ankles and waist. There seemed but one little control switch that would slide over a metal arc of intensity contacts.

"Oh, Lee—what—what are you going to do—?" Aura stood white with terror.

"She said—four or five of them in a cave near here—perhaps they haven't yet gotten large—"

Down in a little ravine Lee found himself running forward in the luminous darkness. He called back, "Aura—you stay where you are—you hide, until it's over—"

Then, in the turmoil of his mind, there was no thought of the girl. There was only the vision of old Anthony lying back there so helpless—his burning eyes bitter with this thing which had so horribly come to his little realm. To meet force with force was the only answer.

It was not Lee's plan to increase his size for a moment now. By doing that, almost at once he would be discovered. And perhaps there were still four or five of the murderers, still not giants, in a cave nearby.

The dim rocky ravine, heavy with shadows, led downward. He came to a tunnel opening, advancing more cautiously now. And then, as he turned an angle ahead of him, down a little subterranean declivity a luminous cave was visible. Groff's hideout. At one of its entrances here Lee stood for an instant gasping. The five men were here—Groff and four of his villainous companions.

The five bodies lay strewn—horribly mangled. And the wreckage of their size-change mechanisms was strewn among them.

So obvious, what had happened! Franklin had been the first to get large. And at once he had turned on them. Franklin, the weakling who dared not have any rivalry! And now Franklin was outside, out in the hills, a raging, murderous monster. For a moment, in the grisly shambles of the little cave Lee stood transfixed. Then his hand was fumbling at his belt. He shoved the small

switch-lever.

There was a shock—a humming—a reeling of his senses. It was akin to what he had felt on the space-globe, but stronger, more intense now. For an instant he staggered, confused. The wires strung on him were glowing; he could feel their heat. Weird luminous opalescence streamed from them—it bathed him—strange electrolite radiance that permeated every minute fibre of his being.

With his head steadying, Lee suddenly was aware of movement all about him. The dim outlines of the cave-room were shrinking with a creeping, crawling movement. Cave-walls and roof all shrinking, dwindling, drawing down upon him. Under his feet the rocky ground seemed hitching forward.

This little cave! In a moment while he stood shocked into immobility, the cave was a tiny cell. Down by his feet the gruesome mangled corpses were the size of children. The cave-roof bumped his head. He must get out of here! The realization stabbed him. Why, in another moment or two these dark walls would close upon him! Then with instant changing viewpoint he saw the true actuality. He was a growing giant, crouching here underground—a giant who would be crushed, mangled by his own monstrous growth.

Lee turned, staggered into the little tunnel, shoved his way out. The walls pressed him; they seemed in a moment to close after him as he gained the outer glowing darkness.... There was only a narrow slit in the dwindling cliff to mark the tunnel entrance. Lee had the wits to crouch in a fairly open space as he stared at the dwindling trees, the little hills, all shrinking. Franklin must be around here somewhere. Franklin doubtless would see him in a moment.

And then as Lee rose up, Franklin saw him. Lee put a hand on one of the little hills at his waist, vaulted it so that he faced Franklin with what seemed no more than a hundred feet between them. For that second Franklin was transfixed. Amazement swept his face. His muttering was audible:

"Why—why—what's this—"

An adversary had come to challenge his power. As Lee bounded forward, on Franklin's face while he stood transfixed, there was wonderment—disappointment—sudden instinctive fear—and then wild rage. He stooped; seized a boulder, hurled it at the oncoming Lee. It missed; and then Lee was on him, seizing him.

Franklin's body had not been enlarging, but as he saw Lee coming, his hand had flung his switch. They gripped each other now, swaying, locked together, staggering. Franklin still was more than head and shoulders above Lee. His huge arms, with amazing power in them, bent Lee backward. He stumbled, went down with Franklin on him. "Got you! Damn you," he said.

His giant hands gripped Lee's throat, but Lee was aware that his own body was enlarging faster than Franklin's, upon which the size-current had only now started to act. If Lee could only resist—just a little bit longer! His

groping hands beside him on the ground seized a rock. Monstrous strangling fingers were at this throat—his breath was gone, his head roaring. Then he was aware that he had seized a rock and struck it up into Franklin's face. For a second the hands at Lee's throat relaxed. He gulped in air, desperately broke free and staggered to his feet.

But Franklin was up as quickly. The tiny forest trees crackled under Lee's tread as again he hurled himself viciously on his antagonist....

At the head of the distant ravine, the numbed Aura crouched alone, staring out at the hills with mute horror—staring at the two monstrous giants slugging it out. Franklin was the larger. She saw Lee rise up, and with a hand on one of the hills, vault over it. Giants that loomed against the sky as they fronted each other and then crashed together, went down.

Lee was underneath! Dear God—

Two monstrous bodies—Lee was lying with a ridge of crags under his shoulders.... Franklin's voice was a blurred roar of triumph in the distance. Then she saw Lee's groping hand come up with a monstrous fifty foot boulder. He crashed it home.

They were up again. Their giant staggering lunges had carried them five miles from her. They were almost the size of fighting titans. The blurred distant shapes of them were silhouettes against the glow of the sky. The forest out there was crackling under their tread ... a blurred roar of breaking, mangled trees....

It was just a few seconds while Aura stared, but each second was an eternity of horror. Then one of the monstrous figures was toppling. A great boulder had crashed on Franklin's head; he had broken loose, staggering while Lee jumped backward and crouched.

For just a second the towering shape of the stricken Franklin loomed up in the sky. And then it fell crashing forward. A swift-flowing stream was there, and the body fell across it—blocking the water which dammed up, then turned aside and went roaring off through the mangled forest.

Lee, again in his former size, sat at old Anthony's bedside, with Aura behind him. The news of the combat out there against the sky had come to Anthony—the excitement of it, too much for his faltering old heart....

"But you will be all right, grandfather. The thing is over now."

"Yes. All right—of course, Lee. Just a visitor here—and you will take my place—"

He lay now—as old Anna Green had been that night—just on the brink. "Lee, listen to me—those mechanisms—the space-globe—Lee, I realize now there is no possibility that we could help Earth—and surely it could only bring us evil here. What we have found here—don't you see, back on Earth each man must create it for himself. Within himself: He could do that, if he chose. And so you—you must disconnect us—forever—"

"Yes, grandfather—"

"And I—guess that is all—"

For some time he seemed to hover on the brink, while Lee and Aura, sitting hand in hand, silently watched him. And then he was gone.

The last of the mechanisms irrevocably was smashed. The little line of vacuums and tubes of the space-globe's mechanisms went up into a burst of opalescent light under Lee's grim smashing blows.

Then silently he went outside and joined Aura. Behind them, down the declivity toward the village, the people were gathering. He was silent, his heart pounding with emotion, as he faced them from a little eminence—faced them and heard their shouts, and saw their arms go up to welcome him.

Slowly he and Aura walked down the slope toward his waiting people. And with her by his side, her hand in his, Lee Anthony knew then that he had found fulfillment—the attainment of that which is within every man's heart—man's heritage—those things for which he must never cease to strive.

The Wedge

Finding his way out of this maze was only half the job.

When the concealed gong sounded, the man sitting on the floor sighed. He continued, however, to slump loosely against the curving, pearly plastic of the wall, and took care not to glance toward the translucent ovals he knew to be observation panels.

He was a large man, but thin and bony-faced. His dirty gray coverall bore the name "Barnsley" upon grimy white tape over the heart. Except at the shoulders, it looked too big for him. His hair was dark brown, but the sandy ginger of his two-week beard seemed a better match for his blue eyes.

Finally, he satisfied the softly insistent gong by standing up and gazing in turn at each of the three doors spaced around the cylindrical chamber. He deliberately adopted an expression of

simple-minded anticipation as he ambled over to the nearest one.

The door was round, about four feet in diameter, and set in a flattened part of the wall with its lower edge tangent with the floor. Rods about two inches thick projected a hand's breadth at four, eight, and twelve o'clock. The markings around them suggested that each could be rotated to three different positions. Barnsley squatted on his heels to study these.

Noting that all the rods were set at the position he had learned to think of as "one," he reached out to touch the door. It felt slightly warm, so he allowed his fingertips to slide over the upper handle. A tentative tug produced no movement of the door.

"That's it, though," he mumbled quietly. "Well, now to do our little act with the others!"

He moved to the second door, where all the rods were set at "two." Here he fell to manipulating the rod handles, pausing now and then to shove hopefully against the door. Some twenty minutes later, he tried the same routine at the third door.

Eventually, he returned to his starting point and rotated the rods there at random for a few minutes. Having, apparently by accident, arranged them in a sequence of one-two-three, he contrived to lean against the door at the crucial instant. As it gave beneath his weight, he grabbed the two lower handles and pushed until the door rose to a horizontal position level with its hinged top. It settled there with a loud click.

Barnsley stooped to crawl through into an arched passage of the same pearly plastic. He straightened up and walked along for about twenty feet, flashing a white-toothed grin through his beard while muttering curses behind it. Presently, he arrived at a small, round bay, to be confronted by three more doors.

"Bet there's a dozen of you three-eyed clods peeping at me," he growled. "How'd you like me to poke a boot through the panel in front of you and kick you blubber-balls in all directions? Do you have a page in your data books for that?"

He forced himself to *feel* sufficiently dull-witted to waste ten minutes opening one of the doors. The walls of the succeeding passage were greenish, and the tunnel curved gently downward to the left. Besides being somewhat warmer, the air exuded a faint blend of heated machine oil and something like ripe fish. The next time Barnsley came to a set of doors, he found also a black plastic cube about two feet high. He squatted on his heels to examine it.

I'd better look inside or they'll be disappointed, he told himself.

From the corner of his eye, he watched the movement of shadows behind the translucent panels in the walls. He could picture the observers there: blubbery bipeds with three-jointed arms and legs ending in clusters of stubby but flexible tentacles. Their broad, spine-crested heads would be thrust forward and each would have two

of his three protruding eyes directed at Barnsley's slightest move. They had probably been staring at him in relays every second since picking up his scout ship in the neighboring star system.

That is, Barnsley thought, it must have been the next system whose fourth planet he had been photo-mapping for the Terran Colonial Service. He hoped he had not been wrong about that.

Doesn't matter, he consoled himself, *as long as the Service can trace me. These slobs certainly aren't friendly.*

He reconsidered the scanty evidence of previous contact in this volume of space, light-years from Terra's nearest colony. Two exploratory ships had disappeared. There had been a garbled, fragmentary message picked up by the recorders of the colony's satellite beacon, which some experts interpreted as a hasty warning. As far as he knew, Barnsley was the only Terran to reach this planet alive.

To judge from his peculiar imprisonment, his captors had recovered from their initial dismay at encountering another intelligent race—at least to the extent of desiring a specimen for study. In Barnsley's opinion, that put him more or less ahead of the game.

"They're gonna learn a lot!" he muttered, grinning vindictively.

He finished worrying the cover off the black box. Inside was a plastic sphere of water and several varieties of food his captors probably considered edible. The latter ranged from a leafy stalk bearing a number of small pods to a crumbling mass resembling moldy cheese. Barnsley hesitated.

"I haven't had the guts to try this one yet," he reminded himself, picking out what looked like a cluster of long, white roots.

The roots squirmed feebly in his grasp. Barnsley returned them to the box instantly.

Having selected, instead, a fruit that could have been a purple cucumber, he put it with the water container into a pocket of his coverall and closed the box.

Maybe they won't remember that I took the same thing once before, he thought. *Oh, hell, of course they will! But why be too consistent?*

He opened one of the doors and walked along a bluish passage that twisted to the left, chewing on the purple fruit as he went. It was tougher than it looked and nearly tasteless. At the next junction, he unscrewed the cap of the water sphere, drained it slowly, and flipped the empty container at one of the oval panels. A dim shadow blurred out of sight, as if someone had stepped hastily backward.

"Why not?" growled Barnsley. "It's time they were shaken up a little!"

Pretending to have seen something where the container had struck the wall, he ran over and began to feel along the edge of the panel. When his fingertips encountered only the slightest of seams, he doubled his fists and pounded. He thought he could detect a faint scurrying on the other side of the wall.

Barnsley laughed aloud. He raised one foot almost waist-high and drove the

heel of his boot through the translucent observation panel. Seizing the splintered edges of the hole, he tugged and heaved until he had torn out enough of the thin wall to step through to the other side. He found himself entering a room not much larger than the passage behind him.

To his left, there was a flicker of blue from a crack in the wall. The crack widened momentarily, emitting a gabble of mushy voices. The blue cloth was twitched away by a cluster of stubby tentacles, whereupon the crack closed to an almost imperceptible line. Barnsley fingered his beard to hide a grin and turned the other way.

He stumbled into a number of low stools surmounted by spongy, spherical cushions. One of these he tore off for a pillow before going on. At the end of the little room, he sought for another crack, kicked the panel a bit to loosen it, and succeeded in sliding back a section of wall. The passage revealed was about the size of those he had been forced to explore during the past two weeks, but it had an unfinished, behind-the-scenes crudeness in appearance. Barnsley pottered along for about fifteen minutes, during which time the walls resounded with distant running and he encountered several obviously improvised barriers.

He kicked his way through one, squeezed through an opening that had not been closed quite in time, restrained a wicked impulse to cross some wiring that must have been electrical, and at last allowed himself to be diverted into a passage leading back to his original cell. He amused himself by trying to picture the disruption he had caused to the honeycomb of passageways.

"There!" he grinned to himself. "That should keep them from bothering me for a few hours. Maybe one or two of them will get in trouble over it—I hope!"

He arranged his stolen cushion where the wall met the floor and lay down.

A thought struck him. He sat up to examine the cushion suspiciously. It appeared to be an equivalent to foam rubber. He prodded and twisted until convinced that no wires or other unexpected objects were concealed inside. Not till then did he resume his relaxed position.

Presently one of his hands located and pinched a tiny switch buried in the lobe of his left ear. Barnsley concentrated upon keeping his features blank as a rushing sound seemed to grow in his ear. He yawned casually, moving one hand from behind his head to cover his mouth.

Having practiced many times before a mirror, he did not think that any possible watcher would have noticed how his thumb slipped briefly inside his mouth to give one eyetooth a slight twist.

A strong humming inundated his hearing. It continued for perhaps two minutes, paused, and began again. Barnsley waited through two repetitions before he "yawned" again and sleepily rolled over to hide his face in his folded arms.

"Did you get it all?" he murmured.

"Clear as a bell," replied a tiny

voice in his left ear. "Was that your whole day's recording?"

"I guess so," said Barnsley. "To tell the truth, I lose track a bit after two weeks without a watch. Who's this? Sanchez?"

"That's right. You seem to come in on my watch pretty nearly every twenty-four hours. Okay, I'll tape a slowed-down version of your blast for the boys in the back room. You're doing fine."

"Not for much longer," Barnsley told him. "When do I get out of here?"

"Any day," Sanchez reassured him. "It was some job to learn an alien language with just your recordings and some of your educated guesses to go on. We've had a regular mob sweating on it night and day."

"How is it coming?"

"It turns out they're nothing to worry about. The fleet is close enough now to pick up their surface broadcasting. Believe me, your stupid act has them thoroughly confused. They hold debates over whether you could possibly be intelligent enough to belong in a spaceship."

"Meanwhile, I'm slowly starving," said Barnsley.

"Just hang on for a couple of days. Now that we know where they are, they're in for a shock. One of these mornings, they're going to hear voices from all over their skies, demanding to know what kind of savages they are to have kidnapped you—and in their own language!"

Barnsley grinned into his improvised pillow as Sanchez signed off. Things would really work out after all. He was set for an immensely lucrative position; whether as ambassador, trade consultant, or colonial governor depended upon how well the experts bluffed the blubber-heads. Well, it seemed only his due for the risks he had taken.

"Omigosh!" he grunted, sitting up as he pictured the horde of Terran Colonial experts descending upon the planet. "I'll be the only one here that hasn't learned to speak the language!"